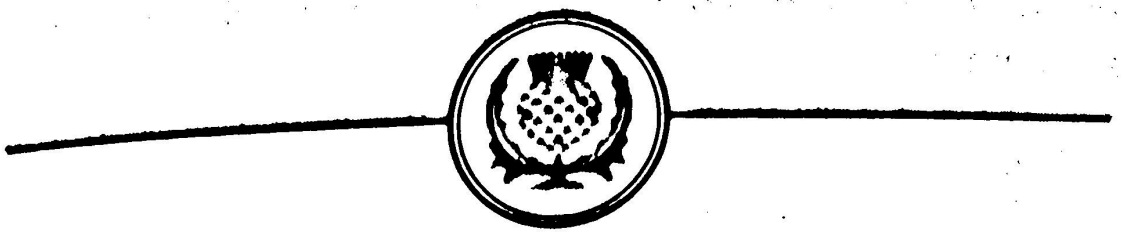


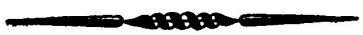
# Chapter 1

## IN THE BEGINNING

*England is the southern, and Scotland is the northern part of the celebrated island called Great Britain. England is greatly larger than Scotland, and the land is much richer, and produces better crops. There are also a great many more men in England, and both the gentlemen and the country people are more wealthy, and have better food and clothing there than in Scotland. The towns, also, are much more numerous, and more populous.*

*Scotland, on the contrary, is full of hills, and huge moors and wildernesses, which bear no corn, and afford but little food for flocks of sheep or herds of cattle. But the level ground that lies along the great rivers is more fertile, and produces good crops. The natives of Scotland are accustomed to live more hardily in general than those of England.*

*TALES OF A GRANDFATHER*, CHAPTER I



For three billion years Scotland was on a collision course with England.

I am talking in terms of geology. Scotland's geological past involves a barely believable story in which whole continents moved around like croutons floating half-submerged in a bowl of thick soup; a story of great oceans forming and disappearing like seasonal puddles, of mighty mountains being thrown up and worn down, of formidable glaciers and ice-caps advancing and retreating behind mile-thick walls of ice as they melted and reformed again. Scotland itself has been a desert,

a swamp, a tropical rainforest, and a desert again; it has drifted north over the planet with an ever-changing cargo of lizards, dinosaurs, tropical forests, giant redwoods, sharks, bears, lynx, giant elk, wolves – and also, in the last twinkling of an eye in the geological time-scale, human beings.

And always it was on that inexorable collision course with England.

In their learned writings, geologists tend to toss millions of years around like confetti. About three billion years ago what is now (largely speaking) 'Scotland' was part of a continent known as *Laurentia*, one of the many differently-sized 'plates' which moved slowly around the surface of the globe. Some eight hundred million years ago it was lying in the centre of another super-continent thirty degrees south of the equator. Over aeons of time it wandered the southern hemisphere before drifting north across the equator. By six hundred million years ago Scotland was attached to the North American continent, separated by an ocean called *Iapetus* from the southerly part of what was to become Britain and which was then attached to the European continent.

And then, some sixty million years ago, the *Iapetus* ocean began to close. North Britain and South Britain came together, roughly along the line of Hadrian's Wall. That collision produced the Britain we know today (although it was still connected to Europe). But the weld continued to be subject to stress and strain long after the land masses had locked together: over a three-million-year period a chain of volcanoes erupting off the western seaboard of Scotland created many of the islands of the Hebrides, including Skye, Mull, Arran, Ailsa Craig, St Kilda and Rum.

The foundation of history is geology and its related subject of geomorphology. The underlying rock has shaped the landscape and has influenced, through the soil, the kind of plants, animals, birds and insects in every part of the countryside; it has thereby shaped the lives and livelihoods of the human communities which have lived here.

Agriculture would flourish on the productive farmland on the flatter east coast of Scotland. The more mountainous landscape of the west with its thin, acid soils was suitable only for subsistence husbandry. In the Central Belt of Scotland the abundance of coal and oil-shale entombed in the underlying rocks fuelled the Industrial Revolution and would foster the growth of the iron, steel, heavy engineering and shipbuilding industries.

Edinburgh Castle, at the heart of what became the nation of Scotland, would be built on the eroded roots of a volcano which had





erupted some 340 million years ago, when Scotland still lay south of the equator. Castle Rock itself was carved into a classic crag-and-tail shape by the gouging passage of ice during the last glaciation.

When Sir Walter Scott opened his *Tales of a Grandfather* with his summary description of the difference between Scotland and England, the modern science of geology was in its infancy (that science, incidentally, was created by Scotsmen like James Hutton[1] and Sir Charles Lyell[2]. Scott did not know *why* Scotland was so different from England; it took the pioneers of geology to explain it.

## *The first people in Scotland (c.7000 BC)*

One day in the early 1980s a ploughman was working on a potato field near the village of Kinloch, at the head of Loch Scresort on the island of Rum in the Inner Hebrides. As his ploughshare turned over the soil, he caught sight of a beautiful barbed and tanged stone arrowhead. He reported the find at once, and in 1984–85 archaeologist Caroline Wickham-Jones conducted an excavation of the area on behalf of Historic Scotland. What she unearthed was the earliest human settlement site yet discovered in Scotland, dating from the Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age) period, nearly nine thousand years ago.

It was a large camp-site rather than a formal settlement: arcs of stake-holes indicated the locations of several shelters, and there were many traces of fires and broken hearth-stones as well as numerous pits and hollows. These first 'Scots' had built small tent-like shelters out of wood, brushwood and skins; they made hearths on which they could prepare food and even smoke meat and fish to keep for the winter. The climate at that time was moist and relatively warm – perhaps 2°C warmer than today; much of the island was covered by open heathlands with shrubs of juniper and bog myrtle, but there was

1 Edinburgh-born James Hutton (1726–97) is now universally recognised as the 'father of modern geology'. He was the first person to grasp the nature of the immense age of geological time and the concept of sequences within that time-scale; until that time, it was widely believed that the earth was precisely 4,004 years old. His book, *Theory of the Earth* (1788), long predated Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859), and ranks alongside it as one of the greatest scientific contributions of all time.

2 Sir Charles Lyell (1797–1875) was the prophet of the theory of 'continental drift' (plate tectonics) which would later be refined by the German meteorologist Alfred Wegener in 1915. Lyell had been struck by the evidence of massive changes in climate indicated by the rock records. In the year of his death he stated: 'Continents, therefore, although permanent for whole geological epochs, shift their positions entirely in the course of ages.'

also light, low-canopied woodland, while copses of birch and hazel flourished in the more sheltered areas. Remains of carbonised hazelnut shells showed that nuts were an important part of the early inhabitants' diet.

The most significant find at Kinloch was the discovery of an assemblage of more than 140,000 stone tools and discarded flint-like material. The Mesolithic dwellers on Rum had made a variety of tools from stone, including microlithic ('small stone') arrowheads, scrapers, awls, blades and flakes. They used flint which they collected as pebbles from the beaches; but they also had access to a good knapping stone known as bloodstone, which has similar properties to flint. The source of the Rum bloodstone was on the west coast of the island, ten kilometres from the Kinloch settlement: Bloodstone Hill (Creag nan Steàrnan).

Good-quality stone for tools is rare in Scotland, and the presence of bloodstone made Rum very special to the early inhabitants of the western seaboard; we know from archaeological sites elsewhere that people from many of the surrounding islands and the adjoining mainland used bloodstone from Rum for their tools.

Such were the first known inhabitants of prehistoric Scotland. They had moved up from the south (i.e. England) soon after the end of the last Ice Age, ten thousand years ago, during the Mesolithic period. This sounds very ancient indeed, but it is worth remembering that hunter-gatherers had been living in England for at least four thousand years before that; and in the much warmer climate of the Middle East, people were already living in cities and experimenting with woollen textiles, metal-working, pottery and the irrigation of farmlands.

The Mesolithic incomers to Scotland were not 'settlers', as such. They were small family groups or communities of nomadic people who lived by hunting, fishing and gathering plants; they would establish camps where they could spend the winter and then make forays in pursuit of deer herds in the spring and summer. They made tools and weapons of stone, they used fire for cooking and warmth, and they dressed in animal skins. They were mobile on both land and sea, and soon established barter-links with other semi-permanent communities.

It is impossible to say how large the Mesolithic population of Scotland was, but several sites have already been identified at places like Morton on Tentsmuir, north of St Andrews and at various other places from Grampian to Argyll.





The Mesolithic period in Scotland lasted for about four thousand years, and merged into the Neolithic (New Stone Age) period around 3000 BC. By then the last land-link between south-east England and the Continent was submerged, and Britain had become an island. This change had involved an influx of new people from the south, people who started to clear the forests and farm the land. There were now permanent communities, such as the marvellous Neolithic village of Skara Brae, on Orkney.

## *Skara Brae, Orkney (3100–2600 BC)*

In the winter of 1850 a ferocious storm stripped the turf from a high sand-dune known as Skara Brae in the Bay of Skaill, on the west coast of mainland Orkney. An immense midden was exposed, as well as a semi-subterranean warren of ancient stone buildings. What came to light in that storm turned out to be the best-preserved prehistoric village in northern Europe. And not only was it perfectly preserved – it was the earliest in Europe as well: the village of Skara Brae was inhabited around 3100 BC, more than half a millennium before the Great Pyramid of Egypt was built (2500 BC), and long before Stonehenge (2000 BC).

A splendid new £900,000 Visitor Centre was opened in April 1998. It had taken ten years to plan and build, and it provides a graphic introduction to the story of Skara Brae, using interactive computer images and a replica of one of the original stone houses. But nothing can match the extraordinary experience of seeing the place for oneself.

The 'village' comprises half a dozen separate houses and some associated structures, including a very large workshop for manufacturing stone tools. The houses are spacious and cellular, connected by covered passage-lanes. The village was deliberately embedded into the congealed mass of the midden up to roof height, to provide stability and insulation. The walls were made of local Orkney flagstone, which is easily worked and splits naturally into building slabs. All the fittings and furnishings were also fashioned from flagstone – the kitchen dressers, the cupboards, the shelves, the compartments for the beds. Some of the houses had under-floor drains for indoor sanitation.

The houses are roofless now. Visitors walk along the tops of the walls and look down into the interiors of the houses. There is a startling sense of intimacy, peering down into these comfortable, well-furnished

homes: it is easy to imagine the families who lived there for some twenty generations, from 3100 to 2600 BC. The village evokes a vivid sense of immediacy, of instant identity with that close-knit, self-sufficient farming and fishing community.

They lived well. The womenfolk owned a lot of jewellery (necklaces, pendants and pins made from bone, as well as ivory and pumice) which they kept in a recess above the bed. They cooked with home-made pottery on a square stone-built hearth in the centre of the room. Farming consisted of keeping cattle and sheep and a few pigs, and growing barley; the sea provided cod and saithe, lobsters and crabs, cockles and mussels. The nearby cliffs were a cornucopia of seabirds' eggs. Wind and weather drove whales, dolphins, porpoises and walrus ashore on their doorstep.

It was a stable, unchanging lifestyle. Then the village was deserted, around 2600 BC – no one knows how or why. There is no archaeological evidence of sudden emergency or destruction.

The merging of the Neolithic Age into the Bronze Age also saw the flowering of an extraordinary architectural phenomenon – the erection of stone circles and standing stones. On Orkney, not far from Skara Brae, the Standing Stones of Stenness and the Ring of Brogar survive. But the most imposing, and probably the oldest, of the megalithic ('big stone') monuments of Scotland is the great complex at Calanais on the Isle of Lewis – Scotland's 'Stonehenge of the North'.

### *Calanais (Isle of Lewis): 3000–2000 BC*

It used to be called 'Callanish' or 'Callernish'. Before that it was 'Classerniss'. But now the original Gaelic form of the name will be enshrined in the next Ordnance Survey maps of the Western Isles of Scotland, so 'Calanais' it is, officially.

Calanais on the Isle of Lewis lies at the head of Loch Roag, some twenty-four kilometres west of Stornoway. It was built in stages from about 3000 BC and was certainly completed by 2000 BC. Briefly, it is a circle of thirteen standing stones huddled round a massive central monolith, 4.75 metres high, and a small chambered cairn. A double line or 'avenue' of stones comes in from the north, and ragged tongues protruding from the circle create a rough cruciform shape.

The importance of Calanais has long been recognised. In the seventeenth century the people of Lewis called the standing stones *Fir Bhrèige* ('False Men'):





*It is left by traditione that these were a sort of men converted into stone by ane Inchanter. Others affirme that they were sett up in places for devotione.*

JOHN MORISONE OF SOUTH BRAGAR, c.1684

By then the complex had been all but drowned in a layer of peat some 1.5 metres deep. In 1857 the owner of Lewis, Sir James Matheson, ordered the peat to be cleared, and the site became a Mecca for visitors. When the first Ancient Monuments Act was passed in 1882, Calanais was in the primary list of sixty-three prehistoric or later monuments to be scheduled for protection.

The landscape setting, and the setting of the stones themselves, have changed considerably since then. The local inhabitants, who had lived in a row of crofting houses built in the 1860s at the southern edge of the site, were 'cleared', like the peat. Various excavations of dubious value were undertaken. Early in the 1980s a 'proper' excavation was mounted, led by Patrick Ashmore of Historic Scotland, to clarify the precise positions of fallen and missing stones and to repair and conserve the site; in 1982, in a BBC documentary to celebrate the centenary of the Ancient Monuments Act (*Echoes in Stone*), I filmed the tricky re-erection of one of the stones at Calanais.[1] There is now a new Calanais Visitor Centre next door to the Edinburgh University Field Centre; here, visitors can find out about the main site before going on to admire the stones *in situ*.

Calanais has a special aura of enchantment, of marvel and majesty and mystery. What was it originally intended to be? That is its continuing enigma. A temple? A huge funerary complex? A megalithic astronomical observatory to mark important events in the movements of the sun and the moon and the stars? Or all three, perhaps? The engineering and surveying skills required to construct such a complex monument are astonishing; they argue a high level of sustained social organisation, and the sophisticated and purposeful use of regional power to express ancient beliefs and rituals which we still cannot fathom.

These beliefs and rituals were given their most impressive and enduring monument in the great prehistoric chambered tomb of Maes Howe, at Tormiston Mill on the Orkney mainland.

1 Archaeology is simply architecture after it has collapsed. I cherish Patrick Ashmore's description of how he was planning to re-erect the stone: 'And then we'll lower it down and twiddle it a bit, so that it will fit in precisely.' It sums up neatly the *modus operandi* of dealing with our heritage of crumbling ancient monuments which want nothing better than to fall down.

## *Maes Howe on Orkney (3000 BC)*

In 1861 an assiduous local antiquary named J. Farrer, along with a friend, George Petrie, dug their way into the heart of a great green mound known as Maes Howe. They had no idea what to expect. First they tried to make their way along the entrance passage. When they found it blocked solid, they broke through a hole in the top of the mound. They dropped into a central chamber choked with clay and stones, and had it cleared by their workmen. What they found disappointed them: it was clearly a burial chamber, with three built-in recesses or cells for bodies, but all they found was a fragment of a human skull and some horse bones and teeth.

They also discovered, however, that they were not the first 'moderns' to have broken into Maes Howe. In the middle of the twelfth century AD, a band of Norse crusaders ('Jerusalem-farers') had dug a hole in the roof of what they called 'Orkahaug' and dropped in, and the signs of their incursion were still apparent when Farrer and Petrie made their entry. The Norsemen had had their reasons for breaking into the chamber: they knew that the kings of antiquity had been buried in huge burial mounds accompanied by their choicest treasures and weapons, and ransacking burial mounds was a favoured diversion for viking heroes. But the crusaders had found nothing to satisfy their greed in Maes Howe, and had scrawled their disappointment – and their excuses for failure – in runic graffiti on the walls:

> *To the north-west a great treasure is hidden. It was long ago that a great treasure was hidden here. Happy is he who finds the great treasure.*
>
> *It is surely true what I say, that treasure was taken away. Treasure was carried off in three nights before these Jerusalem-farers broke into this howe.*

I make no excuses for returning to Orkney on this lightning tour of prehistoric Scotland, for Orkney is an archaeological paradise, with more outstanding monuments and sites than any other part of Britain of similar size. Maes Howe itself, which is acclaimed as the finest chambered tomb in north-west Europe, is associated with the Orkney farmers who built the Standing Stones of Stenness and the Ring of Brogar, and whose ancestors may have lived at Skara Brae. It was built within a century or two of 3000 BC. The mound stands more than seven metres high, and measures thirty-five metres across. The lofty





central chamber is relatively small (some 4.6 metres square) and is approached by a low, stone-flagged entry-passage. The passage points south-west, and in the evenings around the shortest day of the year (21 December) the rays of the setting sun shine directly into the burial chamber.

Maes Howe is a miracle of early engineering. It is built almost entirely of huge flagstone slabs (megaliths), the largest of which weigh more than thirty tonnes. The walls of the central chamber converge in overlapping slabs of stone to form a vaulted ceiling; the final square of space was closed with slabs.

But Maes Howe has even more to offer than this amazing feat of prehistoric architecture, and for that we have the Norsemen to thank. The graffiti carved by the Orkney crusaders are not the only inscriptions in this fascinating place. After the first Norse break-in, the old burial chamber seems to have become a popular venue for courtship. One boastful inscription states boldly, *Thorný bedded: Helgi carved* [it]. Another, more gallantly, says, *Ingigerð is the sweetest woman there is.* Another refers obliquely to the amorous activities of the local merry widow: *Ingibjörg the fair widow: many a woman has lowered herself to come in here; a great show-off. Erlingr.*

They form part of the largest collection of runic inscriptions anywhere in the viking world – and the fact that their subject-matter is so commonplace gives them, for me, a special value. These are not the epics of kings and heroes which you find in the Icelandic sagas, but the authentic voices of the ordinary folk who, throughout history, are usually as anonymous as a flock of birds. Maes Howe was the ancient, brooding, mysterious place which the Norsemen of Orkney made their own.

## *The Broch of Mousa*

Round about 2000 BC the advent of the Bronze Age brought another revolutionary social change to Scotland with the introduction of metallurgy. A new metal, bronze, which was tougher than silver or gold or copper, underpinned the development of sophisticated social hierarchies based on wealth and power. Bronze brought about an increase in trade and an increase in the effectiveness of weaponry; and the new weaponry enabled ambitious leaders to indulge in territorial aggression.

It was now that Scotland made another uniquely Scottish contribution to architecture – the brochs. They were magnificent edifices: tall

round towers, with tapering double-skinned dry-stone walls bonded together at intervals by rows of flat slabs. Between the double walls were stairs leading to galleries and small rooms on separate storeys. There was room for livestock at ground level, which had only one small, low and easily defended entrance. There were no windows. The brochs were practically impregnable.

There are some five hundred brochs, or traces of brochs, still surviving in Scotland. They were built in large numbers in the north, especially in the Northern Isles, the Western Isles and Caithness, with occasional examples in the southern part of the country.

When were they built, and why? They seem to have originated in Orkney early in the Iron Age, around 200 BC, and were being built until about AD 200, when they were more or less abandoned; their stones were robbed for newer buildings in the farming communities which had been growing around them. They can only have been built as powerful symbols of local authority and prestige, which could also act as strongholds for the local people in times of danger: part refuge, part status symbol.

And who built them? They used to be called 'Pictish towers', but in fact they were constructed by the ancestors of the Picts – the indigenous inhabitants of northern and western Scotland from whom the historical Picts were descended (see Chapter 3).

My own favourite is a broch which stands on a tiny uninhabited island off the east coast of Shetland – the broch of Mousa. It is the best-preserved of all Scotland's brochs; it is still almost intact, standing to a height of thirteen metres. Many centuries after it ceased to be used by the local population the Icelandic sagas record that it was used on two occasions as a refuge by runaway lovers in viking times.

*Egil's Saga* relates how, around AD 900, an Icelander in Norway fell in love with the sister of a powerful Norwegian war-chief, Thórir Hróaldsson, named Thóra Hlaðhönd (Lace-Cuff); her suitor was Björn Brynjólfsson. Thórir refused permission for them to marry, whereupon the lovers eloped one night and boarded a ship bound for Iceland, but were shipwrecked on Shetland on the way. They spent a secure and comparatively comfortable honeymoon that winter in the broch of Mousa while their ship was being repaired, and in the spring they completed their journey to Iceland and lived happily ever after. The daughter of that marriage, Ásgerð, who was conceived on Mousa, became the wife of the eponymous hero of the saga, the great viking warrior-poet Egil Skallagrímsson.

*Orkneyinga Saga* ('The Saga of the Earls of Orkney') tells how, in



1153, a high-born lady named Margaret, the mother of Earl Harald of Orkney, was abducted by an ardent admirer named Sigurður. The couple holed up with a band of supporters in the broch of Mousa. They had brought in plentiful supplies of food and water, and Earl Harald wrathfully but vainly besieged the broch all winter. Eventually he was forced to agree to the marriage.

These stories seem to me to underline the constant need for security in a world which was becoming more and more violent and aggressive. Safety was paramount – and the more prosperous you were, the more important safety precautions became.

## *Crannogs*

Deep in the heart of Perthshire, in the village of Kenmore at the eastern end of Loch Tay along the A827 from Aberfeldy, the historical enthusiast comes upon an extraordinary structure beside an embryo marina. On a solid platform of pile-driven wooden stilts in the water stands a massive wooden, thatched round-house. It is a crannog, reconstructed by the Scottish Trust for Underwater Archaeology.

Crannogs were, essentially, loch-dwellings built on artificial or modified natural islands in inland waters. They were usually linked to the shore by timber walkways or stone causeways, for protection against robbers or invaders. They were built by some of the first farmers in Scotland towards the end of the Neolithic Age (3000 BC), and some of them were still inhabited as late as the seventeenth century AD. Eighteen crannogs have been found in Loch Tay alone; hundreds more have been identified the length and breadth of Scotland north of the Central Belt. Some remain hidden as submerged stony mounds, others have become tree-covered islands. They were mini-castles long before castle-building began in Scotland.

The Kenmore crannog is based on 'Oakbank crannog', on the northern shore of Loch Tay at Fearnan ('Place of the Alder'), which was built around 500 BC, at the start of the Iron Age, and was the first crannog in Scotland to have been thoroughly excavated underwater. The round-house has a floor of stout alder-logs thickly carpeted with bracken. It is furnished with all the kinds of artefacts which the excavation produced: a central flat-stone hearth for cooking and heating, storage areas for provisions, wooden bowls and plates, leather clothes and shoes and bags, jewellery made from jet or polished stone, woven and dyed textiles. It makes an unexpectedly roomy homestead for an extended family of perhaps fifteen to twenty people.

The crannog-dwellers on Loch Tay were farmers, even though they lived on water. They tilled the adjoining land and grew barley and two different types of wheat. They kept cattle, sheep and goats. They cut and coppiced hazel to make hurdles for partitions and wood-panels. Their diet of lamb, beef and boar was supplemented by fish, butter, cheese, hazelnuts, nettles, sorrel and wild carrots, and they enjoyed wild cherries, sloes, blackberries and cloudberries.

And they had water-transport – a 10.5 metre log-boat, hollowed out from a single oak-tree, was found at the site; it was large enough to carry animals and other cargo – the first Loch Tay ferry, perhaps! They presumably had canoes as well.

A visit to the Crannog Centre at Kenmore is a rewarding experience. One comes away more impressed than ever by the evidence of the intelligence and creative skills of these early Scots who pioneered the land-uses and methods of land-management with which we are familiar today. There was nothing 'primitive' about our early and Iron Age ancestors.[1]

Sir Walter Scott made no reference to these early ancestors in his *Tales of a Grandfather*; they were *pre*-history. For him, *history* only began with the coming of the Romans to Scotland.

It was the Roman incursion which caused the first armed collision with the forces from the south, through England.

1 I am indebted to American-born Barrie Andrian, director of the Crannog Centre, for an illuminating tour of the Centre, which was opened in 1997. 'The reconstruction crannog', which was started as an archaeological experiment to try out the technique of driving alder-wood piles to a depth of two metres into the soft bed of the loch, using local materials and ancient methods, took two years to build. Crannog research has been conducted by Nicholas Dixon of Edinburgh University for more than twenty years.



# Chapter 2

## THE ROMANS IN SCOTLAND

*A long time since, eighteen hundred years ago and more, there was a brave and warlike people, called the Romans, who undertook to conquer the whole world, and subdue all countries, so as to make their own city of Rome the head of all the nations upon the face of the earth. And after conquering far and near, at last they came to Britain, and made a great war upon the inhabitants, called the British, or Britons, whom they found living there. The Romans, who were a very brave people, and well armed, beat the British, and took possession of almost all the flat part of the island, which is now called England, and also of a part of the south of Scotland.*

*TALES OF A GRANDFATHER*, CHAPTER I

From the road it looks like a genteel suburban garden, discreetly protected by freshly-painted black iron railings, with a small gate inviting access; but for those who take the trouble to stop and enter, it is a magic garden indeed. Inside is one of the most delightful little monuments in the care of Historic Scotland – the excavated remains of the Roman Bath-House at Bearsden, near Glasgow.

A weather-proof interpretive panel mounted on a solid stone pedestal provides a clear and graphic account of what the visitor can see among the manicured lawns: the walls, stone floors and hypocaust of an elaborate and well-appointed sauna for the small cavalry detachment which garrisoned one of the forts on the Antonine Wall.

The Antonine Wall was a solid and continuous barrier which stretched across the narrowest part of Scotland between the estuaries of the Forth and the Clyde – the Forth–Clyde isthmus. It ran for sixty kilometres (forty Roman miles) along the high ground bordering the southern edge of the central valley of Scotland, from Bridgeness at Bo'ness, west of Edinburgh on the south coast of the Firth of Forth, to Old Kilpatrick west of Glasgow on the north bank of the Clyde. It was started around the year AD 140 on the order of the Emperor Antoninus Pius. It took four years to build, and consisted of a massive stone-based rampart of turf, some 3.4 metres high, topped by a timber breastwork to protect the Roman sentries on patrol; the turf came from a wide and deep defensive ditch which was dug on the northern side of the wall. The wall was studded along its length with forts and beacon-platforms, linked by a road running behind the wall known as the Military Way. Because of its turf construction, and the sprawl of modern urban development, little of it has survived; but the remains of some of the forts, and a few short stretches of the wall, are still visible at places like Watling Lodge (ditch), Rough Castle and Seabegs Wood (rampart, ditch and Military Way), between Falkirk and Bonnybridge.

In a sense the Antonine Wall was as much a customs barrier as a defensive wall; it was a means of controlling trade and traffic moving into and out of the Roman province, as well as a base for military patrols into the native territory to the north. One of those frontier posts was Bearsden.

The fort at Bearsden has long since been engulfed by the tide of neat housing of this douce suburb on the north of Glasgow; the houses now sitting on the site overlook the Bath-House which lay in a large annexe attached to the wall. The legionaries coming off sentry duty were able to choose between a plunge in the Cold Room and Bath (*Frigidarium*), or the Hot Dry Room (*Sudatorium*) with its graded Warm Rooms (*Tepidaria*). To one side lay a stone-built communal latrine housing a wooden bench with round holes cut in it for seating over the sewer channel.

The Bearsden Bath-House with its 'mod cons' presents a vivid picture of the advance of Roman civilisation into the wildlands of Scotland. It brings us from prehistory into history 'proper'. But it also foreshadows the long struggle to settle a border between north and south, between Scotland and England.

Iain MacIvor, former Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments for Historic Scotland, says:





*The first military works to divide north from south Britain were made by the Romans, and for a long time there was a fanciful link between the famous wall from the Tyne to the Solway [Hadrian's Wall] and the border between Scotland and England. The Scots were to find a lasting source of national pride in the notion that, whereas the southern parts of Britannia had been taken over without too much difficulty by the mighty Roman army, their own ancestors had held out against the Roman Empire for centuries, and that this undaunted resistance forced the Romans to build one of the wonders of Europe to protect their province of Britannia – Hadrian's Wall.*

The location of the Roman frontier in the north varied considerably over the years. Julius Caesar claimed a 'Conquest' after his two invasions in 55 and 54 BC; but it was not until the massive invasion of AD 43 under the Emperor Claudius that the real conquest of southern Britain began. It took the Romans a full forty years of gradual advance and consolidation to become masters of their new province of Britannia. In the course of these four decades they suffered some severe setbacks, including the ferocious uprising of the Iceni tribe of Norfolk and Suffolk under their redoubtable warrior queen Boudica in AD 60–1. By AD 79, however, all England and Wales had been subdued. Now only the far north remained: the Lowlands and Highlands of Scotland. These were *terrae incognitae* to the Romans: unreconnoitred badlands inhabited by (to them) unknown but ferociously barbarian tribes.

There seem to have been three tribes in the Lowlands at this time: the Votadini in the east with their capital Traprain Law in Lothian; the Novantae in the south-west (Dumfries and Galloway); and in between them the Selgovae, whose territory reached from Eskdale to the Cheviot Hills.

The hill-fort of the Votadini on Traprain Law (152 metres) had earthen ramparts (now almost invisible) enclosing sixteen hectares. It was more than just a stronghold or a refuge: it housed a permanent settlement and the administration of the district – an embryo town or burgh, in effect. The Votadini would later shift their capital from Traprain Law to Edinburgh (Din Eidyn), probably to the Castle Rock, and would be known in heroic legend as the Gododdin (see Chapter 3).

Around the Firth of Clyde were the Damnonii. Above that were the mountainous lands of many Highland tribes, collectively called the Caledonii (Caledonians) by Tacitus.

In AD 78 the newly-appointed Governor of the Province of Britannia, Julius Agricola, embarked on a vigorous policy of subduing the native tribes still beyond Roman control in Wales and the north of England. Then he turned his mind to an invasion of Scotland. With him was his son-in-law, the historian Tacitus, who would write (in AD 98) an account of the campaigns in Scotland in his *Life of Agricola*. In AD 80 Agricola launched his blitzkrieg with a pincer movement. He sent his Ninth Legion up through the territory of the Votadini on the east side of Scotland, following the line of today's A68 through Lauderdale and north over the Lammermuirs at Soutra to Lothian and the Firth of Forth. Meanwhile the Twentieth Legion moved up the west side through Annandale, along the line of today's M74 to Clydesdale and the Firth of Clyde. Then the two legions joined forces and marched up to the Firth of Tay. By AD 82 Agricola had subdued the Novantae in the south-west and secured the occupation of Scotland below the Central Belt. He made treaties and alliances with the native peoples where he could, and consolidated his grip by building several garrison forts, the most substantial of which was at Newstead, next to the Eildon peaks near Melrose. He also built a string of small forts (without a continuous barrier) which superintended a line between the Clyde and Forth, with a network of roads to secure the territory to the south.

What was the impact of the Roman incursion into the Lowlands of Scotland? Anna Ritchie, freelance archaeologist and prolific writer on the archaeology and history of early Scotland, says:

> *At the time the impact must really have been remarkable, because the tribesmen would never have seen anything like the Roman military machine which marched into Scotland.*
>
> *And there was also an immense economic effect. Once the Roman army was established in the Lowlands of Scotland, there was an impact on agriculture because the army had to be fed. They needed immense quantities of grain, and that grain had to be obtained locally once the supplies they brought with them were finished. You can see that archaeologically, in fact, in these great souterrains, or earth houses: underground storage chambers, some of which are so large that they cannot just have been for the needs of the little settlements in which they lie; they can only be that size because they were storing the grain for the occupying army.*
>
> *Another area of impact would have been the transport network they needed for military mobility, for provisioning the army and for sending messages between battalions. That must have been quite stunning in the eyes of the local peoples, because there had been nothing more than tracks until that time. The roads and the great forts with their ramparts and huge wooden gateways would have been a glimpse of a totally alien world.*





Agricola's ambitions did not stop at the Clyde–Forth isthmus. His ultimate aim was the conquest of the whole of northern Britain. In AD 83 he started his march north, with a powerful fleet in support. He had a formidable army under his command: three full legions of crack Roman infantrymen supported by cavalry and squadrons of battle-hardened auxiliaries. He wintered on the Tay, and next spring continued his advance northwards up the coastal plain, taking out any native settlements on the way and building a series of temporary marching camps. Meanwhile the Caledonians, according to Tacitus, 'turned to armed resistance on a large scale'.

Agricola's strategy was to bring the Caledonians, under their leader Calgacus, to pitched battle. In the late summer of AD 84 the strategy succeeded. The locations of Agricola's marching camps suggest that he cut across country from Stonehaven into Morayshire along the line of the modern A96 to Inverurie and Huntly; and there, somewhere in the north-east, at a place which Tacitus called *Mons Graupius* (the 'Graupian Mountain'), the two sides met for the final battle.

More than thirty thousand of the Caledonian tribesmen had gathered in close-packed tiers on the slope of a hill. In the valley between the two armies the Caledonian charioteers careered back and forth, taunting the Romans and displaying their skills, daring them to advance. And advance they did; under the personal command of Agricola, the auxiliary squadrons moved forward in a disciplined frontal attack while the cavalry engaged the charioteers. The Caledonians fought with reckless courage, but gradually they were outflanked and outfought at close quarters. By the end of the day they had been comprehensively routed amid fearful slaughter: ten thousand tribesmen were said by Tacitus to have perished, at a cost of only 360 Roman dead. The survivors scattered and fled 'far into the trackless wilds'.

The location of 'Mons Graupius' has never been positively identified and has been the source of endless debate among archaeologists and historians. Some think the battle took place near Huntly on the slopes of a hill named Bennachie; others opt for somewhere closer to Stonehaven. The apparent similarity between 'Graupius' and 'Gram-

pian' is intriguing, if inconclusive. It is also tempting to think that it may have been somewhere near Inverness – such as Culloden? – where in 1746, more than 1600 years later, another retreating 'Caledonian' army would be brought to battle and shattered by the superior fire-power and discipline of a military machine from the south (see Chapter 28). There, as at Mons Graupius, it was the last strategic point where a native leader could hold an army of Highland tribesmen together before they melted away to their winter straths and glens; there, as at Mons Graupius, defeat would leave what Tacitus called 'a grim silence on every side, the hills deserted, homes smoking to heaven'.

The account by Tacitus of the battle of Mons Graupius makes compelling reading – particularly the noble rhetoric he put into the mouth of Calgacus (his name may be associated with the Gaelic *calgath* and mean 'swordsman') in his pre-battle speech, a ringing denunciation of Rome and its supposed civilisation, and the first recorded despairing cry of 'Freedom!' which would echo through the Highlands and Lowlands for centuries to come:

> *Former battles in which Rome was resisted left behind them hopes of help in us, because we, the noblest souls in all Britain, the dwellers in its inmost shrine, had never seen the shores of slavery and had preserved our very eyes from the desecration and the contamination of tyranny: here at the world's end, on its last inch of liberty, we have lived unmolested to this day, in this sequestered nook of story.*
>
> *But today the farthest bounds of Britain lie open; there are no other peoples beyond us; nothing but seas and cliffs and, more deadly even than these, the Romans, whose arrogance you shun in vain by obedience and self-restraint. Harriers of the world, when the earth has nothing left for their ever-plundering hands, they scour even the sea; if their enemy has wealth, they have greed; if he be poor, they are ambitious; neither East nor West can glut their appetite; alone of people on earth they passionately covet wealth and want alike.*
>
> *To plunder, butcher, steal – these things they misname 'empire': they make a desert, and they call it peace.*

The defeat was a crushing blow to the Caledonians and their northern neighbours, and a significant victory for the Romans; although beaten, however, the tribes were not broken. Agricola sent a reconnaissance fleet round the north coast to confirm that Britain was, indeed, an





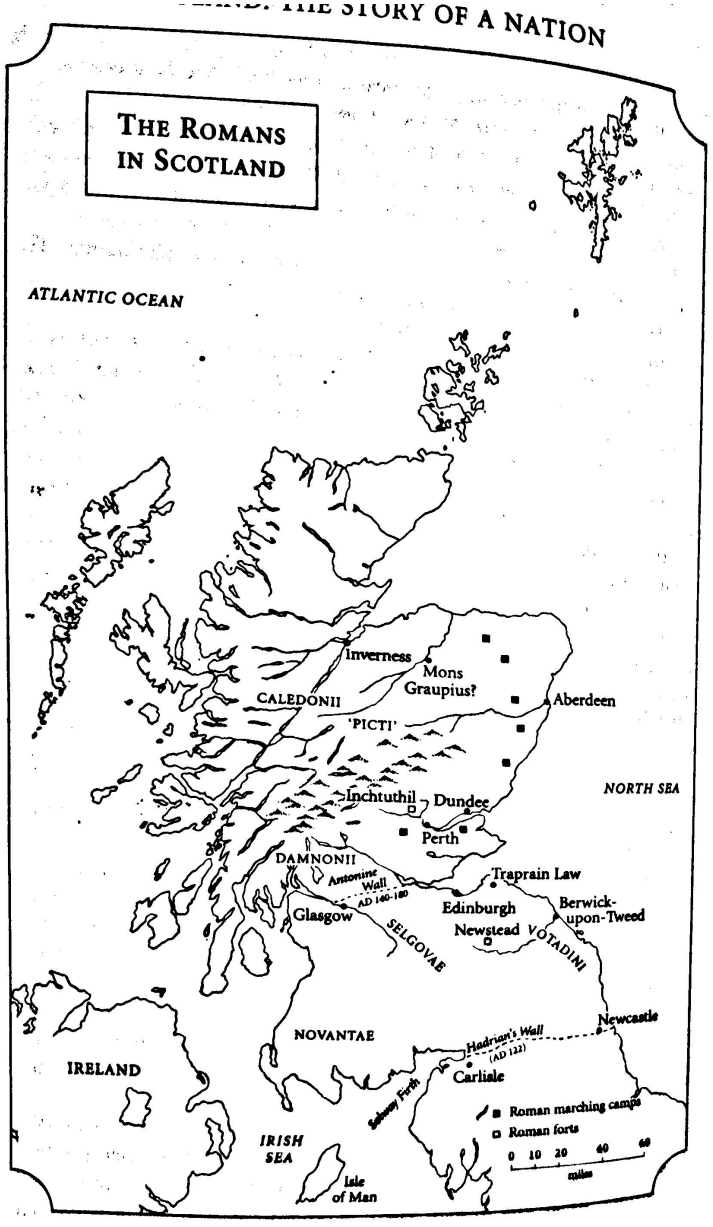
island. He may have felt the terrain so inhospitable as not to be worth the effort of military conquest; besides, he had already exceeded the normal five-year period as Governor. He contented himself with ordering the completion of a massive legionary fortress at Inchtuthil on the Tay, seven miles east of Dunkeld, with satellite forts blocking the way into the northern mountains. The following year he was recalled to Rome.

There was to be no Roman subjugation of the Highlands. The fortress at Inchtuthil did not last long. The Empire was in a constant state of flux, with troops required in hot-spots which would flare up here and there on the Continent. In AD 87, before it was even completed, the fortress was abandoned and systematically dismantled, its stores removed and its defences slighted. The Romans were in retreat, withdrawing gradually from all their forts and bases in Scotland. The native tribespeople helped them on their way with constant harassment. By 105 the Romans had withdrawn to a line between the Solway and the Tyne.

The tide turned again with the accession of Hadrian as Roman Emperor in 117. He visited Britain more than once, and in 122 he decided to consolidate the northern frontier with that great barrier, Hadrian's Wall, across the isthmus between the Solway and the Tyne. The Lowland tribes of Scotland were left in peace for a time – until 139, when a new Roman Governor (Quintus Lollius Urbicus) marched north from the wall in strength to reoccupy the territory Agricola had seized nearly fifty years earlier. It was then that he decided to consolidate his gains by building the Antonine Wall.

The Antonine Wall did not last very long either – only twenty years or so. After it was abandoned around 161 it was reoccupied, but only for a very short time, and by about 180 the Romans seem to have decided to pull back towards Hadrian's Wall. There were occasional uprisings in the Lowlands, followed by severe punitive campaigns. But by 214 the Romans had finally withdrawn from Scotland, leaving Hadrian's Wall as the ultimate frontier – the most impressive and enduring legacy of Roman rule in Britain. Scotland and its restless tribes were left to their own devices, held in check only by their domestic preoccupations and the Roman soldiery still garrisoning the fortlets of Hadrian's Wall.

By now, however, the graffiti were really on the wall. And in 297, one of the most famous names of the north appears in the documentary record – the Picti, the warlike painted people who are still considered one of the great enigmas of early Scotland, with a kingdom which



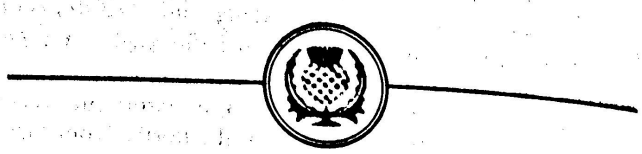





stretched from north of the Firth of Forth to the Moray Firth and beyond (see Chapter 3).

They are mentioned as playing a key part in the great 'Barbarian Conspiracy' which, through accident or design, attacked Roman Britannia simultaneously from all sides in 367; the Angles and Saxons overwhelmed the coastal forts of the south and east, the Gaelic-speaking Scoti from Ireland came sweeping in across the Irish Sea, and the Picti overran Hadrian's Wall from the north. From then on, the Roman hold on Britannia became more and more tenuous. They appointed three generals in quick succession in an attempt to save the province, and the defences were patched up again. But it was to no lasting avail. The Roman Empire was crumbling, and by 410 the last of the Roman army, along with the Roman administrators, had left Britain's shores.

A century before they left, however, the Romans had given this enduring name to their main enemies in the north of Scotland: in the year 297 a Roman poet had referred to them as Picti ('painted ones'). The name stuck, and 'Picts' became a generic term for the many 'Caledonian' tribes who lived north of the Forth–Clyde line and who thwarted the imperial ambitions of the Romans at their ultimate frontier.



# Chapter 3

## PICTS, SCOTS, BRITONS, ANGLES AND OTHERS

*These people of the northern parts of Scotland, whom the Romans had not been able to subdue, were not one nation, but divided into two, called the Scots and the Picts; they often fought against each other, but they always joined together against the Romans, and the Britons who had been subdued by them.*

*TALES OF A GRANDFATHER*, CHAPTER I

In the western outskirts of Inverness stands a massive hill crag, now engulfed in trees – Craig Phadrig. The summit of this crag was once the site of a great hill-fort, a mighty bastion of the early Pictish kings.

Not a lot of people know that it is there, or how to find it when they do know. It stands in the Kinmylies district, near Craig Phadrig Hospital; you drive up the steep, dead-end Leachkin Brae, which is not marked as leading to anywhere. Forest Enterprise has provided two woodland walks which meander through the forest at the lower levels of the crag; each has its own car park. To reach the summit of the crag, you use the second (upper) car park and follow the walkway from it. Then you leave its carefully graded surface, take a very deep breath, and embark on a fiercely steep scramble up, and up, and up.

Twenty-five years ago, archaeologists cleared the surface vegetation and revealed two concentric ramparts crowning the summit; these ramparts had been what is called 'vitrified' – that is to say, the timber





framework inside the walls had been set on fire (deliberately or accidentally) so that the stone and earth of the massive ramparts were fused into a slaggy mass. The ramparts enclosed a flat expanse measuring some eighty metres by forty. When I was chairman of the Ancient Monuments Board for Scotland in the 1980s, we all toiled up to the top to admire the revelation of this great hill-fort, and decided there and then that Something Must Be Done to make this remarkable monument more accessible and comprehensible to the public; it was being used at the time as an obstacle course by trail riders and motorbike scramblers and the old ramparts were being undermined by the roots of invasive trees.

Well, Something Was Not Done – immediately. The whole summit is now overgrown with thistles and other tall plants. The commanding views of both the Beauly Firth to the north-west and the Moray Firth to the north-east are blocked by massive tree-growth. The ramparts are once again smothered by shrubs and undergrowth. Historic Scotland has plans to clear the summit and its ramparts once again, however, and people should soon be able not only to reach the summit with much greater ease but also to understand what is to be seen there.

Craig Phadrig was a major Pictish stronghold in the north of Scotland from the fifth century onwards. Towards the end of the sixth century it was the fastness of one of the most powerful kings named in the Pictish king-lists – King Bridei mac Máelchú, often called by the anglicised name of 'Brude'. In his monumental *A History of the English Church and People* (c.731), the Venerable Bede described King Bridei as *rex potentissimus*, and he seems to have been the over-king of many local kingdoms which comprised the core of the realm of 'Pictland', or 'Pictavia'; this realm extended from around the Firth of Forth and covered the centre and north-east of Scotland as far as Orkney (the name for the sea between Caithness and Orkney is the 'Pentland' Firth, which is a Norse word meaning 'Pictland'). One of his 'capitals' may have been on Castle Hill in Inverness; and it is tempting to see Craig Phadrig as the place where St Columba (see below) may have met King Bridei during an expedition up the Great Glen to convert the northern Picts to Christianity in the latter half of the sixth century.

According to Columba's biographer, Adomnán, King Bridei refused to open the heavy double gates of the ramparts to his missionary visitor. Columba then went up to the gates, made the sign of the cross against them and knocked; the bolts slid back of their own accord

and the gates swung open – whereupon King Bridei 'greatly honoured the holy and venerable man, as was fitting, with the highest esteem'.

## *The 'Picts'*

So who were these people, these Picts? The first thing to recognise is that there was nothing 'mysterious' or 'problematic' about them, as scholars used to state. The Picts were not a new element in the population: 'Picts' ('*picti*' – painted ones) was simply the Roman nickname for the tribal descendants of the indigenous Iron Age tribes of northern Scotland.[1] Anna Ritchie, in *Picts* (Historic Scotland, 1989), puts it like this:

> *The Picts were Celts. Their ultimate ancestors were the people who built the great stone circles like Calanais on the Isle of Lewis in the third millennium* BC *in Neolithic times, and the brochs in the early Iron Age from about 600* BC *to* AD *200. We have no evidence of any major invasions of Scotland after the initial colonisation by farming peoples soon after 4000* BC *– there seems to have been very little fresh blood coming in during the Bronze Age.*

Just outside the town of Brechin, in Angus, by the A90 trunk road from Dundee to Aberdeen, an impressive £1.2 million visitor centre was opened in the summer of 1999 in the country park of the Brechin Castle Centre. It is called *Pictavia*, and can be described as somewhere between a museum and a theme park. The display tells, vividly and graphically, the story of the Picts, and is a splendid introduction to their world for visitors of all ages and abilities; it includes not only many examples of Pictish stones and jewellery but also interactive computer facilities explaining the meanings of Pictish symbols ('Cyber Symbols') and the sounds of Pictish music (the 'Tower of Sound').

Some time after the age of King Bridei, of Craig Phadrig fame, the centre of Pictish power moved southward, to Angus, Perthshire and Fife, but the Picts' distinctive culture did not change. They were not by any means the painted barbarians described by Roman chroniclers;

1 The idea that the Picts painted or tattooed their bodies is older than the reference to *Picti* in AD 297 by the the poet Eumenius. Herodian of Syria, who wrote (in Greek) a history of the Roman emperors from AD 180 to 238, said of the Picts: 'They tattoo their bodies not only with likenesses of animals of all kinds, but with all sorts of drawings.'





on the contrary, they were a cultured society ruled by a sophisticated warrior aristocracy which could afford to employ learned men and, more particularly, craftsmen of all kinds – particularly the sculptors who fashioned the magnificent carved stones which are the unique legacy of the Picts.

This period of early Scottish history has long been known as the 'Dark Ages', not because the deeds of the time were so dark but because the documentary sources are too meagre to shed a great deal of light. Modern historians prefer to call the 'Dark Age' of Scotland by a less misleading name – 'Early Medieval'. What *is* clear is that it was a time of considerable and rapid political and ethnic change. By pulling together the sometimes elusive accounts of medieval chroniclers, and calling in all the available archaeological evidence, it is now possible to see various historical patterns developing in Scotland, both north and south of the Forth–Clyde line.

In our attempt to understand the changing shape of early Scotland it would be enormously useful to be able to call upon the aid of television, with its graphic use of 'morphing' – merging collages of images into one another, like long-range weather forecasts. The pattern of conquests and occupations in Scotland in the centuries succeeding the Roman withdrawal presents a confusing kaleidoscope of shifts in power, like an ever-changing jigsaw puzzle. Before we reach a more stable picture of 'Scotland' in the twelfth century, say (the time of David I – see Chapter 6), we have to follow the fortunes of several apparently different groupings: Picts, Gododdin, Angles, Britons/Celts and Scoti/Scots/Gaels, as well as specific kingdoms like Pictland, Fortriu, Strathclyde, Rheged, Alba and ultimately Scotia.

## *The Gododdin*

While the Picts were the power in the north, another martial kingdom had been developing to the south of the Firth of Forth, in the Lothians – the home of the British tribe known to the Romans as Votadini. During the Roman occupation they had been a client kingdom, or at least had lived peaceably under Roman subjugation; archaeologists have found a major hoard of rather battered Roman silverware which was buried at Traprain Law in the fifth century, after the Roman withdrawal.

By 600, however, the Votadini had their stronghold in Edinburgh (Din Eidyn), and emerged in history under their proper British, or Old Welsh, name of 'Gododdin' in an elegiac heroic poem called *Y*

*Gododdin*, composed by a local bard named Aneirin at about that time. The poem tells the story of a raiding expedition mounted by the king of the Gododdin, Mynyddawg Mwynfawr, who ruled territories stretching from the Forth to the Tees. He gathered a princely war-band of 360 chosen champions from all over his realm and even farther afield. For a year they feasted and caroused in the towering timber hall of his stronghold in Edinburgh, wearing robes of purple and gold, with gold brooches and neck-bands, drinking from goblets of gold or silver. Then they pledged themselves, according to ancient custom, to conquer or die in the service of their lord. Next morning they went clattering down the Castle Rock, riding southward deep into the lands of the Angles. The encounter took place at 'Catraeth', identified as Catterick in what is now Yorkshire:

*Men went to Catraeth, they were renowned.*
*Wine and mead from gold cups was their drink.*
*A year in noble ceremonial,*
*Three hundred and sixty gold-torqued men.*
*Of all those who charged, after too much drink,*
*But three won free through courage in strife,*
*Aeron's two war-hounds and tough Cynon,*
*And myself, soaked in blood, for my song's sake.*

*Gododdin's war-band on shaggy mounts,*
*Steeds the hue of swans, in full harness,*
*Fighting for Eidyn's treasure and mead.*
*On Mynyddawg's orders*
*Shields were battered to bits,*
*Sword-blades descended*
*On pallid cheeks.*
*They loved combat, broad line of attack:*
*They bore no disgrace, men who stood firm.*
FROM *THE GODODDIN* (TRANS. JOSEPH P. CLANCY)

It was the very stuff of heroic legend, that ferocious, unforgiving battle.

Legendary or not, historical fact or poetic fiction, the power of the Gododdin was certainly broken a few years later. In 638 Din Eidyn was besieged and captured by the avenging Angles, and the place seems then to have received the anglicised name Edinburgh, by which it is known today.





## *The Angles*

It may come as a surprise, at first blush, to think of Angles in Scotland – the Angles from northern Germany who had come over to the south-east of England, first in the fourth century as invited auxiliaries to assist the Romans in keeping their hold on Britannia but later, in the fifth century, as invaders bent on conquest. They had created their own kingdom in England, 'Anglia', in the area of today's East Anglia. They were a tough warrior people, the Angles, and in 547, according to the Venerable Bede, the Anglian King Ida thrust his way far northwards over the Humber, across the Tees and the Tyne, and established his royal seat on the formidable fortress crag of Bamburgh on the north-eastern coast of England. By the year 605 all this territory had been consolidated into the Kingdom of Northumbria (literally, 'north of the Humber') under King Æthelfrith, whom Bede described as 'a very powerful and ambitious king'.

We must be careful, when we talk about the ancient name Northumbria, not to be misled by the boundaries of today's Northumberland. Northumbria at its greatest extent in the seventh century extended all the way north (after the capture of Edinburgh in 638) to the Firth of Forth and even beyond, perhaps to the Mounth (the eastern extension of the Grampian massif). In that context, it is possible to see the heroic raid by the Gododdin deep into Yorkshire as an abortive pre-emptive strike against the growing imperial ambitions of the kingdom of Northumbria.

After the collapse of the Gododdin, the aggressive expansionism of the Angles of Northumbria extended their dominance beyond Edinburgh into the southern part of Pictland; the power-centre of Pictland had by then moved from Inverness south to Abernethy, perhaps, and/or Scone, beside today's city of Perth, and a new name was being applied to it – the kingdom of 'Fortriu'. From 653 to 685 much of the southern part of this area seems to have been under Northumbrian control. There was an attempted Pictish uprising in 672, but this was put down with the utmost ferocity and many of the Pictish aristocracy were massacred. The climax came in 685, with a battle between the Picts and the Northumbrians in the Angus glens, north of the estuary of the Tay.

## *The Battle of Dunnichen (Nechtansmere): 685*[1]

*In 685 a check was given to the encroachment of the Saxons by the slaughter and defeat of their king Egfrid at the battle of Drumnechtan, probably Dunnichen; and the district south of the Forth was repeatedly the scene of severe battles between the Picts and the Northumbrians, the latter striving to hold, the former to regain, these fertile provinces.*

WALTER SCOTT, *HISTORY OF SCOTLAND*, VOL. I (1830)

In front of the parish church in the village of Dunnichen, near Forfar in Angus, a commemorative cairn was erected by Letham and District Community Council in 1985. It was set up to mark the 1300th anniversary of one of the most significant battles of 'Dark Age' Scotland: a battle which, until recently, was referred to as 'Nechtansmere' but is now called the Battle of Dunnichen (as Walter Scott called it in his *History of Scotland*). 'Nechtansmere' is the name by which the battle was known from Northumbrian sources.

In 685 the ruler of Northumbria was a headstrong king named Ecgfrith. Against the advice of all his counsellors and of St Cuthbert, Bishop of Lindisfarne, who had a premonition of disaster, he decided on a massive cavalry attack on Pictland, under its new king, Bridei mac Bili (who also happened to be Ecgfrith's kinsman). Ecgfrith probably marched through the Lowlands to Edinburgh, then may have crossed the Forth at Stirling and the Tay at Perth. As he advanced up Strathmore from Perth, he was diverted from his planned route by the Picts; using classic guerrilla tactics, they fell back towards territory of their own choosing rather than offering pitched battle in open country.

The earliest primary account of the Northumbrian invasion of 685 was written, forty-five years later, by the Venerable Bede:

*King Ecgfrith ... rashly led an army to ravage the province of the Picts. The enemy pretended to retreat, and lured the king into narrow mountain passes, where he was killed with the greater part of his forces on the 20th of May and the 15th [year] of his reign.*

1 I am indebted to Graeme Cruickshank, director of Edinburgh Historical Enterprises, for an enlightening guided tour of the presumed battle-site and its environs; it was due to his dedicated and scholarly researches that the true significance of the Battle of Dunnichen began to be acknowledged.





It was somewhere in these 'narrow mountain passes' that the Picts ambushed the invaders on 20 May 685 with devastating effect. It has not proved possible to identify the location with certainty. The topography in this southern, fertile part of Angus is open and rolling (the terrain is much more mountainous farther to the north-west); but Bede had never been to Scotland, and his description doubtless relied on exaggerated accounts brought back by the survivors to justify the defeat. A plausible scenario can be made for an ambush somewhere in the Dunnichen area, probably between the high ground of Dunnichen Hill ('Dun Nechtan') and the marshy ground known later as Dunnichen Moss ('Nechtan's mire'); the 'mere', or marshland, has now been reconstituted as a large pool by the farmer of Dunnichen Mains farm. The identification of 'Nechtansmere' with Dunnichen Moss is purely circumstantial, and not all scholars agree with it; but it is attractive, nonetheless.

In this scenario, the Pictish cavalry would have lured Ecgfrith into an ambush by feigning fear, until Ecgfrith found himself marching eastward past Dunnichen Hill alongside an extensive stretch of 'mere' at the base of the hill. At that point the trap was sprung: the main Pictish forces came swarming down from behind the top of Dunnichen Hill to attack the Northumbrian cavalry on the flank and cut off its retreat. The Northumbrians were virtually wiped out and Ecgfrith was killed.

In the churchyard of Aberlemno, some ten kilometres to the north of Dunnichen, there is a magnificent Pictish cross-slab (a fawn-coloured sandstone slab with a cross carved on it). The cross, richly decorated in high relief, is on the front of the slab; on the reverse, under two Pictish symbols, is depicted a battle-scene in three tiers. It has been called a 'tapestry in stone', but it is more than that: it is a brilliantly detailed despatch by a war-artist from the front line. It portrays the battle in a series of four vivid cartoon panels. The combatants are carefully distinguished: bare-headed Pictish warriors confronting (and eventually defeating) opponents who are wearing Anglo-Saxon helmets with long nose-guards and distinctive neck-collars. The Pictish cavalrymen are riding long-tailed ponies which they control with their knees and feet, leaving both hands free to wield their weapons, whereas the Northumbrians on their heavier, short-tailed ('bang-tailed') horses need to use one hand for the reins. The Pictish infantrymen are drawn up in ranks with a swordsman in front, defended by a warrior behind him wielding a long thrusting-spear and another armed with a throwing-spear.

The Aberlemno cross-slab seems to have been made early in the eighth century; it is tempting to interpret it as a memorial depiction of the Battle of Dunnichen itself. In the bottom right-hand corner an outsize Northumbrian (the size signifies a person of rank – perhaps Ecgfrith himself) lies dead on his side, his helmeted corpse now carrion for ravens.[1]

The outcome of the battle was decisive, according to the Venerable Bede:

> *Henceforward the hopes and strength of the English realm began to waver and slip backwards ever lower. The Picts recovered their own lands which had been occupied by the English . . . Many of the English at this time were killed, enslaved or forced to flee from Pictish territory.*

The battle marked the end of the Anglian/Northumbrian ascendancy in Scotland: from then on, the Northumbrians were never to be a power in the lands north of the Forth. Modern historians now claim that it was the Battle of Dunnichen which paved the way for northern Britain eventually to become the independent nation of Scotland and not just a northern extension of England. Some have even compared it to Bannockburn as 'the most decisive battle in Scotland's history'.

As for Bridei mac Bili, the conquering hero of Dunnichen, he died in 693 and was buried in the royal cemetery on Iona.

## *The Saltire of Scotland*

Half a century or more after the Battle of Dunnichen, it is said, there was another battle against the Northumbrians, of symbolic significance at least, which legend associates with the village of Athelstaneford, on the B1347 near Haddington, in East Lothian; this battle is traditionally believed to have provided Scotland with its patron saint, the apostle Andrew, and its banner, the saltire.

According to Walter Bower's massive *Scotichronicon*, a Latin history of Scotland written in the 1440s, around 750 a Pictish warrior-king named Unust (729–61) was having the worst of a battle against the

1 For safety's sake, the Aberlemno stone in Aberlemno churchyard is covered in winter by stout wooden crating to protect it from bad-weather erosion. A faithful fibre-resin cast of the stone is now in the Museum of Scotland; it was formerly on display in the Meffan Museum in Forfar.





Northumbrians, when St Andrew appeared to him in a dream and promised him victory; this boost to Pictish morale apparently did the trick, assisted by another supernatural omen – a huge cloud-formation against the blue sky in the shape of a saltire (a diagonal cross, the *crux decussata*, on which Andrew was said to have been crucified at Patras in Achaia). Hence the adoption of St Andrew as Scotland's patron saint, and the blue-and-white saltire banner as the symbol of Scotland's nationhood.

The early Church in Scotland built up the cult of St Andrew by promoting the story that some of the saint's relics had been brought to Scotland at the behest of an angel by St Rule (Regulus) in the fourth century; a shrine was built for the relics at Kilrymont, which later became the site of the great cathedral of St Andrews. Having Andrew as its patron saint was a great coup for Scotland: he had been the first of the apostles whom Jesus had called. St Andrews quickly became a renowned centre for evangelisation and pilgrimage.

The tourist trade today is as important to the Scottish economy as the pilgrim trade was then – and Athelstaneford, as 'the birthplace of Scotland's flag', has seen no reason to miss out. In 1965 a commemorative cairn was erected in the graveyard of the parish church, incorporating a granite panel showing two armed hosts facing one another beneath the St Andrew's Cross in the sky, and the inscription:

> *Tradition says that near this place in times remote*
> *Pictish and Scottish warriors about to defeat an army*
> *of Northumbrians, saw against a blue sky a great*
> *white cross like Saint Andrew's, and in its image*
> *made a banner which became the flag of Scotland.*

Beside the cairn the saltire flies permanently on a tall white flagpole. A Flag Heritage Centre was established there in 1996 in a converted sixteenth-century doocot (dovecote).

## *The Britons*

To the west of the Lowlands there was another realm – or rather, another shifting conglomeration of petty kingdoms and principalities – which took in a huge stretch of land from the Clyde down through today's Dumfries and Galloway, over Hadrian's Wall and across the Solway as far south as the present Lake District. This was the kingdom of the Britons – basically, Cumbria; but, as with Northumbria, we must

not confuse its boundaries with those of today's Cumbria. The original Cumbria was the Latinised ancient name for this territory of the Britons, derived from a variant of the same word as modern Welsh *Cymry*, the name of the peoples there. In the sixth century this Brittonic realm may well have been the home ground of Arthur (Arturus), a Romanised British war-leader who was promoted, in legend, into a great European champion of Christianity, the 'once and future king' of the Britons.

Within this British realm of Cumbria two separate kingdoms emerged north of Hadrian's crumbling wall. One was Strathclyde, whose boundaries stretched as far south as Penrith. Its power-centre was at the basalt Rock of Clyde (*Altcluith*, Dumbarton Rock), where Dumbarton Castle now stands. Its 'spiritual' centre seems to have been in the Govan area, somewhere near Govan Old Parish Church; this church now houses an impressive collection of thirty-one pieces of sculpted stonework dating from the ninth to the eleventh centuries, including a magnificently carved giant sarcophagus.

The British of Strathclyde reached the height of their power in the seventh century; Strathclyde survived as a client kingdom of Alba until the Battle of Carham in 1018 (see below), where the last native king of Strathclyde, Owain the Bald, was killed.

The other British kingdom was Rheged, based on Carlisle and covering Galloway in the extreme south-west of Scotland. Rheged is the most shadowy of all the kingdoms of the 'Dark Ages'. One name stands out from ancient Welsh poetry: that of Urien, king of Rheged, whose exploits were hymned by the Welsh bard Taliesin. In 590 he took part in a siege of the Anglian stronghold on the island of Lindisfarne, off the north-east coast of England, but was assassinated by a rival British king who was jealous of his prowess.

## *The 'Scots'*

The people the Romans called *Scoti* originally came from Ireland. The name was just a term of opprobrium applied by the Roman authors to describe raiders from Ireland, and probably meant, simply, 'pirates'; it differentiated the Scoti from the Picti of mainland Scotland. The Scoti had raided in the Hebrides and the western mainland of Scotland, they had taken part in the 'Barbarian Conspiracy' which overran the Roman province of Britannia in 367 (see Chapter 2), and they had probably been coming across the North Channel to settle in the west of Scotland for quite a long time. Around the year 500, however, tradition suggests that there was a positive 'migration' of the Scoti to





Scotland: the seventh-century Irish *Senchus fer nAlban* ('Tradition of the Men of Scotland') records the story that the Scoti, under their king Fergus Mór mac Eirc, an enterprising hero in the legendary mould, moved in strength from Antrim in north-eastern Ireland across the North Channel to the rugged, mountainous, island-haunted terrain of Argyll in the west of Scotland. These people were known as the Dál Riata; they spoke Gaelic, and established a new kingdom in the territory of modern Argyll which came to be known as Dalriada.[1]

The Gaelic-speaking Dál Riata in Argyll and the adjacent Inner Hebrides soon started to colonise farther afield. By the end of the sixth century they were hammering at the boundaries of neighbouring states, led by a series of aggressive warrior kings. One of those whose names are writ large in the *Annal of Scotland* was Áedán mac Gabhráin, overlord of Dalriada from 574 to 603, whose recorded exploits included large-scale raids by land and sea against the territories of the Picts, the Britons of Strathclyde and the Anglians of Northumbria. He was eventually defeated and killed by the Northumbrians in 603.

## *Dunadd*

The massive natural fortress of Dunadd, in mid-Argyll, rears out of the Crinan Moss (Moine Mhor – the 'great moss') at the southern end of the fertile Kilmartin Glen above Lochgilphead. For historical pilgrims intent on getting a 'feel' for ancient Dalriada, there is a new Museum and Visitor Centre (Kilmartin House) in the village of Kilmartin at the head of the valley.[2]

The hill-fort of Dunadd is only one of the many power-bases of the

1 The traditional version of an Irish colonisation of Argyll is no longer accepted as uncritically as before: scholars like Ewen Campbell, lecturer in archaeology at Glasgow University, point to the lack of archaeological corroboration of any migration of ideas or artefacts from Ireland to the western mainland of Scotland. Dr Campbell argues that the evidence all points the other way – that there was no change in the population in Argyll and that there was considerable influence in the opposite direction.

2 Kilmartin House won the 1998 Scottish Museum of the Year Award and the 1998 Gulbenkian Prize for Museums and Galleries. Kilmartin Glen contains one of the richest assemblages of prehistoric ritual and ceremonial monuments in Scotland: more than 150 sites within six miles of the village of Kilmartin; an extraordinary collection of cup-and-ring rock carvings; a unique linear cemetery of Neolithic and Bronze Age burial cairns; a fine stone circle at Temple Wood and dozens of other ancient stone monuments, dating back almost to the start of human habitation in Scotland. Kilmartin House, which was opened in 1997, provides a focal point for pilgrims who want to visit the sites, and also houses a research centre for archaeology and landscape interpretation.

old kingdom of Dalriada, but it is perhaps the most striking and evocative. It stands back from the A816 from Lochgilphead to Oban, fifty-four metres high, a grass-grown rock mass made of epidiorite schist and shaped by glacial action – what geologists call a *roche moutonnée*. It is a bit of a scramble in places to reach the top, through natural clefts in the rock, but there is a wonderful panoramic view from the summit which makes the effort well worth while.

The steep zigzag route to the summit leads through two defiles which give access to concentric terraces which girdle it. The terraces are buttressed by the living rock, and any gaps were filled in by walling to complete the defences. The terraces provided space for timber structures, no trace of which now remains. The path leads onwards and upwards to the highest of the terraces, just below the sanctuary of the summit. On this grassy shelf lies the magnet which draws visitors to the top: a carved footprint incised into the bedrock, pointing more or less directly towards the distant Ben Cruachan, the 'holy mountain' of Argyll. There is also a roughly-scratched outline of a boar (a Pictish symbol) and an inscription in the unintelligible alphabet known as ogam. On another rock, just behind the 'heel' of the footprint, is a small hollowed-out basin (possibly for libations).

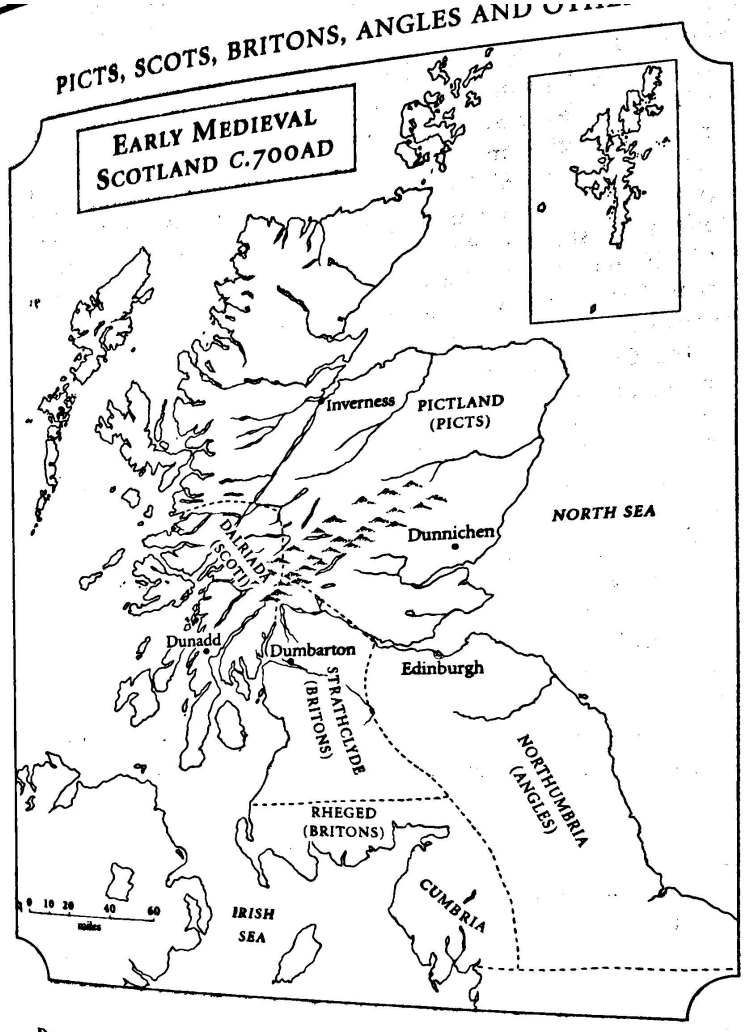
It is a tantalisingly enigmatic spot, where the imagination can take wing. Most commentators now agree that the carved footprint was used in the ritual inauguration of early Dalriadic kings; the new king would have placed one foot in the carving during the ceremony, in full view of his people gathered on the terrace below, to symbolise a royal 'marriage' with the land. Today's visitors cannot resist trying the fit for themselves.[1]

There is a magic resonance about Dunadd; for the people of Argyll it is the birthplace of the Scottish nation, a royal centre of major importance in the growth of 'Scotland' as a coherent realm. It has an overwhelming sense of place, of belonging to the land, superintending the surrounding countryside: the coiling meanders of the River Add below, Kilmartin Glen to the north, the hills of Knapdale to the south and, to the west, the Crinan Estuary and the Sound of Jura marking the route of the incomers from Antrim.

1 The footprint into which visitors place their feet is not quite the original one. In 1979, when erosion and increasing wear and tear were beginning to cause damage to the carvings, an exact mould was made up of reconstituted crushed stone, which matched the texture and colouring of the original in every detail; this replica 'cap', weighing more than fifteen hundredweight, was helicoptered in by the RAF in 1979 and then manhandled into place to fit snugly and unobtrusively over the stone slab.








Recent archaeological excavations have shown that Dunadd was occupied, albeit intermittently, from about AD 500 to 1000; it is usually called 'the capital' – or '*a* capital' – of the kings of Dalriada. It was a place where skilled craftspeople fashioned high-quality jewellery and implements in bronze, silver and gold. It was also a major trading centre in a huge Celtic network which stretched from Ireland, down the west coast of Britain and across to the Mediterranean. Dunadd was clearly an important player in European trade, exporting

commodities like hides, leather and metal-work and importing luxury goods from abroad. One of the most intriguing items found during excavations at Dunadd was a small piece of a yellow mineral named orpiment which comes from the Mediterranean; orpiment is the mineral which produced the beautiful golden yellow ink used by medieval scribes for their illuminated manuscripts, and may have been used on Iona to make the Book of Kells. Adomnán, the biographer of St Columba, described a visit paid by Columba to the *caput regionis* (capital of the region) and his talking to sailors from Gaul – perhaps he was there to buy orpiment for his scriptorium on Iona!

Ted Cowan, Professor of Scottish History at Glasgow University, says of the carved footprint on Dunadd:

> *The new king of Dalriada metaphorically (and almost literally) stepped into the shoes of the old king – it's a perfect size nine shoe, by the way. It carried overtones of fitting the role of being king, of being the only person whose foot fitted the footprint; the last echo of that concept is heard in the story of Cinderella and the glass slipper – the Ugly Sisters try it on, but Cinderella, the 'real' princess, is the only person whose foot fits.*

These inaugurations would have been Christian ceremonies, whatever ancient pagan traditions may have been reflected in them. And that brings us to a consideration of the impact of Christianity on early Scotland.

## *The coming of Christianity*

Before the Romans officially declared an end to their occupation of Scotland, in 410, the south-west of Scotland may already have been Christianised; early in the fourth century the Emperor Constantine had declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire, and this may have led to the establishment of some kind of 'sub-Roman Church' in Pictland.

The Venerable Bede wrote that, after Constantine made Christianity official, 'faithful Christians who during the time of danger had taken refuge in woods, deserted places and hidden caves, came into the open and rebuilt the ruined churches. Shrines of the martyrs were founded and completed and openly displayed everywhere as tokens of victory. The festivals of the Church were observed, and its rites performed reverently and sincerely.'

The one name which emerges from the scanty sources about south-





west Scotland during this period is that of St Ninian. Ninian (Nynia) is the first Christian missionary in Scotland's history who is known to us by name. Bede called him 'a most reverend and holy man of British race', and recorded a tradition that he had been trained in Rome and that his see was at St Martin's Church at Candida Casa (the 'White House'), identified as Whithorn in Galloway. He was, apparently, the son of a converted British chieftain, who began his mission in the south-west late in the fifth century as the bishop of a Romanised community which had been Christian for some time. By the seventh century Ninian had become a cult saint, and many churches were dedicated to him in different parts of Scotland in the ensuing centuries.

In the west of Scotland, St Kentigern, or Mungo,[1] founded a church beside the Molindinar Burn; it was in a 'green hollow' (*glascu*), which gave the city of Glasgow its name. By 600, Kentigern/Mungo was established as the first bishop of the kingdom of Strathclyde centred on Dumbarton; his shrine lies in the crypt of Glasgow Cathedral.

The man most closely associated with the spread of Christianity in the sixth century, however, is Columba (*Colum Cille*, 'Dove of the Church', c.521–97). He was a scion of the Uí Néill, the most powerful royal family in Ireland at the time. Columba was a vigorous and hot-blooded warrior-monk who was banished after a particularly bloody battle and, as a penance, chose to lead a mission to the Scoti of Dalriada. In 563 he set sail in a coracle with twelve companions to do God's work. After some years on an island which Columba called *Hinba* (perhaps Jura), the king of Dalriada gave him the island of Iona, off the west coast of Mull, probably in the early 570s. Here he founded a large monastic community which was to become the spiritual powerhouse of Christianity in northern Britain. It also became a renowned centre of learning and artistic excellence, and owned an extensive library of books: many claim that the magnificently illustrated Book of Kells, now in the library of Trinity College, Dublin, was produced in a scriptorium on Iona. Columba's biographer, Adomnán, wrote that he was engaged in making a new manuscript of a psalter on the day of his death.

The major impact of the Church was the introduction of writing, and the close and mutually beneficial relations between Church and state. The Church was both client and patron of the monarchy. Columba himself ordained one of the kings of Dalriada (Áedán mac

[1] The name Kentigern means 'hound-lord'. The diminutive Mungo means 'hound'.

Gabhráin) on Iona in 574. Another graphic impact was on Pictish art: following the advent of Christianity the Pictish symbol-stones were shaped into slabs with a dominant cross carved on one face, and Biblical figures like David were introduced to symbolise kingship, alongside the characteristic ornamentation of spirals, snakes, dragons, birds and fish.

Although both the Picti and the Scoti were ethnic Celts, the Picts were not the same *kind* of Celts as those incomers who came from Ireland around 500 to found the kingdom of Dalriada. The language the Picts spoke was 'British' or 'Brittonic' Celtic, akin to Welsh, Cornish and Breton (scholars call it 'P-Celtic'), whereas modern Irish and Scottish Gaelic descend from Goidelic Gaelic (which is classified as 'Q-Celtic'). The eventual assimilation of the Picts into the Gaelic culture of the Scots was made much easier through the influence of Christianity. Having been converted by Columban missionaries, the Picts looked to Iona as the head of their Church. Differences between Picts and Gaels began to be reduced, through intermarriage and the exchange of church personnel. So it is reasonable to assume that it was the rise of the Gaelic Church in Pictland which laid the foundations for the ultimate unification of the Picts and Scots as a new kingdom.

But before that could come about, there was another threat to be faced, in the shape of an enemy who would serve to bring the Picts and the Scots even closer together – the vikings.

## *The vikings*

The vikings have long been considered the bogeymen of history. For centuries they were cast in the role of Anti-Christ – merciless barbarians from Scandinavia who plundered and burned their way across the known world, heedless of their own lives or the lives of others, intent only on destruction and rape and pillage. In fact it was never quite as one-sided as that – history seldom is – but it made a good story at the time. Today there is emerging a much more balanced version of the story which depicts the vikings in a less lurid and more objective light. It is mainly a matter of emphasis: less on the raiding, more on the trading; less on the piracy and pillage, more on the poetry and artistry; less on the terror, more on the technology of the Norsemen and the positive effect they had.

Politically as well as militarily they had a profound effect on the shifting, unstable kingdoms which were developing in what was to become Scotland. The historical record of their incursions into Scottish





waters and territory began in 795 with a raid on Iona (the first of three such raids in ten years), and Scotland was then engulfed in the turmoil of what has come to be called the Viking Age (800–1050). While Danish raiders attacked the Continent and southern England, Norwegian invaders established a Norse earldom in Shetland and Orkney which was to last for more than three hundred years, from the middle of the ninth century to the thirteenth.

The Orkney earldom was a semi-autonomous fiefdom of the Norwegian crown, theoretically a Norwegian possession but frequently a recalcitrant one which displayed a large degree of independence. The main source for our knowledge of the Northern Isles during this period is an Icelandic saga, *Orkneyinga Saga* ('The Saga of the Earls of Orkney'), written early in the thirteenth century. It is a sprawling, dynastic chronicle of the lives of the earls of Orkney, a vivid narrative pageant of clashing personalities and dramatic events – not so much a history as a historical novel. It is the only medieval chronicle which has Orkney as the central place of action, but the story has much to say about the Norse impact on the northernmost counties of mainland Scotland, Caithness and Sutherland (which to the Orcadian Norsemen was 'South-land'!).

Today the people of Shetland celebrate their Norse heritage on the last Tuesday of every January with an exhilarating, night-long viking fire-festival called Up-Helly-Aa, which culminates in the ceremonial burning of a viking galley in Lerwick, the capital town of Shetland. It is not an ancient ritual by any means. It was invented by a blind Shetland poet in the 1880s, an aspect of the Victorian 'rediscovery' of the Viking Age by literary figures like Thomas Carlyle and William Morris – and, before them, Sir Walter Scott with his novel *The Pirate* (1821), which was inspired by a fleeting visit to Shetland in 1814 and a glimpse of the ruined medieval baronial building at Sumburgh which he named, romantically, Jarlshof ('Earl's Temple').

From their base in the Northern Isles the Norsemen ruled a miniature empire of the North Sea. It was probably from Orkney that their early raids on Iona were mounted; it was from Orkney that they exercised dominion over the Western Isles, which from then on owed fealty to the Norwegian crown. Viking armies penetrated deep into mainland Scotland in the north and the west, inflicting heavy defeats on the Scoti and the Picts alike. On the west coast, in 870, the vikings stormed the Strathclyde fortress of Dumbarton after a four-month siege; on the east coast in 890 they captured the formidable Pictish fortress of Dunnottar on its apparently impregnable rock projecting

from the coast three kilometres south of Stonehaven. Norse power played a potent part in the kaleidoscope of aggression and alliance from which the picture of Scotland was to emerge.

## *Kenneth mac Alpin (800–58): the union of the Picts and the Scots*

One effect of the viking incursions in the west was to force the Scots of Dalriada to look eastwards along Strathearn ('the Strath of the Irish') towards the richer lands of Pictish Fortriu, where the Picts, too, were under fierce pressure from viking attacks from the east. The power of Dalriada was now in decline and, despite occasional hostility between Scots and Picts, there was a certain inevitability about the way in which the two kingdoms began to come together against the common viking enemy.

This process of gradual unification culminated in the middle of the ninth century with the first joint king of the Picts of Fortriu and the Scots of Dalriada – Kenneth mac Alpin (Cinaed mac Ailpin), known as Kenneth I. He was born about 800, and is believed to have been of mixed Dalriadan and Pictish stock, with a Gaelic father and a Pictish mother.

Out of the welter of warfare which saw the royal families of both kingdoms crushed, Kenneth mac Alpin emerged as king of Dalriada around 840, a few years later he became king of Pictish Fortriu as well. How exactly that came about is not known; according to a lurid folk-tale he invited the leaders of the Pictish nobility to a feast under a flag of truce and had them all slaughtered, but that yarn is no longer given any credence.

Kenneth mac Alpin soon moved his base out of Dalriada and eastward to Tayside, the heartland of Pictland itself. The island of Iona, founding centre of the Columban Church, had proved to be too vulnerable to viking raids: so when another huge viking fleet came prowling down the west coast in 849 on its way to Ireland, Iona and the other 'hallowed islands' were abandoned and the relics of their saints taken to safety on the mainland. The bones and treasures of St Columba were carried from Iona to Dunkeld ('Fort of the Caledonians'), and installed in a great new church there.

It was the end of Dalriada as a historical identity. Kenneth mac Alpin, or one of his successors, established a new royal seat at Scone, near Perth, which became the capital of a united kingdom. He died in his palace at Forteviot in 858, having in the last few years of his life invaded the kingdom of Northumbria no fewer than six times. In the course of these incursions he burned the royal fortress of Dunbar and the great early monastery at Melrose.

Kenneth mac Alpin's unification of Dalriada and Pictland as a new political entity was a landmark in the evolution of Scotland as a single kingdom. His authority extended from the Moray Firth in the north to the Firth of Forth in the south. This kingdom soon came to be called Alba, the old Gaelic name for Britain as a whole, which was now applied specifically to the territory ruled by Scottish kings.

Kenneth mac Alpin founded the first recognisably Scottish royal dynasty, and as a result Scotland's kings are formally numbered from him as Kenneth I. However, the perceived significance of Kenneth mac Alpin in the origins of the Scottish nation is now diminished in the eyes of modern historians. Ted Cowan backs another king as the real creator of the kingdom we now call Scotland; his name was Constantin II (Constantin mac Aeda), and he ruled from 900 to 943:

> *In my view, Constantin mac Aeda was Scotland's equivalent of England's King Alfred, and he should be on the lips of every schoolchild in this country. Perhaps the only reason that he isn't is because his Gaelic name looks so difficult to pronounce! This Constantine did two things. First, he married members of his family into the viking war-bands and bought peace with them in that way. Second, he manufactured a new origin myth for the Scots to give them a pedigree which showed how the Picts and Scots were related.*

The original Scottish origin myth traced the lineage of the Scoti back to biblical times: they were descended from an Egyptian princess named Scota, the daughter of the Pharaoh of the Oppression (Ramses II, 1304–1237 BC). This enterprising princess left Egypt shortly after the Israelites crossed the Red Sea. She wandered for 1,200 years in the deserts of the eastern Mediterranean, before crossing to Sicily and thence her way through the Pillars of Hercules (Straits of Gibraltar), through Spain and then across to Ireland. In her baggage she brought the Stone of Destiny, weighing 152 kilograms, which was reputed to have been used as a pillow by Jacob when, according to Genesis 28, he had the celebrated dream about Jacob's Ladder ('I am the Lord God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed'). From the east coast of Ireland, Scota defied her own Promised Land – Scotland – and sailed away to it with Jacob's sacred Stone.

Constantin II, according to Ted Cowan, made a significant addition to this imaginative account: he instructed his bards to give Scota a husband – Gaedel Glas (Gathelos), a Prince of Scythia and ancestor of the Picts. That gave the Picts and the Scots a common ancestry, as a deliberate part of the nation-building on which Constantin II was engaged. As part of the redefining of the new integrated kingdom, Scota's far-travelled Stone was moved to Scone, where it was put to use as the seat on which the rulers of the united Scottish kingdom were inaugurated – the 'Stone of Scone' or 'Stone of Destiny', as it came to be called.

## *The origin myth of 'the Scots'*

Your identity, both as an individual and as part of a nation, is crucially determined by where you believe you come from – what your origins are, in effect. There comes a time in the growth of any country when it is both politic and imperative to have a respectable pedigree as a nation. And if you don't know it, you invent it.

But how and when, in the case of Scotland, was it done? On what basis was this embryonic origin myth manufactured? Dauvit Brown, a lecturer in Scottish History at the University of Glasgow, has made an exhaustive study of early medieval written sources:

> *The earliest surviving text which propounds the idea, in all seriousness, of Scotland being two thousand years old was written during the 1290s, during the ill-fated reign of John Balliol [see Chapter 9]. It is basically a king-list, but it also includes an account of Scottish origins, explaining that the original Scots were descended from Gaedel Glas and Scota, and came from Egypt and eventually ended up in Scotland. The length of reigns in the king-list, we are told, added up to 1,976 years to the coronation of John Balliol in 1292.*
>
> *The way it was achieved was by an ingenious and simple use of the available material. There was a list of kings from Kenneth mac Alpin. There was also a list of about thirty kings from Fergus Mór mac Eirc, the alleged founder of the 'Scottish' colony of Dalriada around the year 500. There was also a list of sixty-five-plus Pictish kings. All this material was stitched together and presented as if it were a single series of kings, which totalled 113 (once you had included Robert Bruce).*
>
> *It is noticeable that this text, elaborating in this rudimentary*





> *way the idea that Scotland was an ancient kingdom, was written when Edward I [of England] was knocking on Scotland's door with a vengeance. This Irish identity gave the kingship of Scotland the authenticity of age which medieval institutions required, through a royal genealogy stretching all the way back to Noah via the Irish king-lists.*

Any desire to express Scottish identity as a form of ethnicity has an inherent weakness: there is not any one set of 'people' who form the backbone of a group which can be identified as modern Scots. Even in the tenth century this was so, and notions of Scottish ethnicity had to be carefully blended into a constructed notion of Scottish nationality. In the twentieth century, too, the range of peoples and cultures one might mix together when trying to construct a notion of Scottish national identity or national characteristics is as broad as ever. But the one culture still in existence today in Scotland, and the one with the longest track record, is that of the Gaels, who have the strongest claim to being the indigenous people of Scotland.

And that raises a puzzle concerning Walter Scott's *Tales of a Grandfather*: the Celts, these Irish progenitors, were given no mention at all in the opening chapter, and very little mention, indeed, throughout the whole book. Why? Alex Woolf, lecturer in Scottish and Celtic History at Edinburgh University, says:

> *When I first read* Tales of a Grandfather, *what struck me most was that Scott completely passes over the Irish origin of the Scots; he makes it look as if the Scoti were indigenous people alongside the Picts from earliest times. To understand this attitude, we have to look at the period in which Scott is writing – the beginning of the nineteenth century. He grew up in the eighteenth century, when Catholicism was outlawed in the United Kingdom. There was a great anxiety about Catholicism in Britain and Ireland, and the period in which Scott was writing saw a powerful political movement demanding Catholic emancipation, which came in 1829, towards the end of Scott's career as a writer. There was much anxiety, particularly in Ireland, about this upswelling of political fervour of a people who were 'not like us' – people who were not Protestants, people who still spoke Gaelic (which was totally alien to the ruling élites of both Scotland and England and, indeed, of Ireland). I think it was this linkage of Ireland with the threat of Popery which*

*probably led Scott to feel somewhat ashamed of his Irish antecedents himself.*

Ted Cowan agrees:

> *Walter Scott really fudged this whole issue of the Irish origins of the Scots: it did not particularly suit a Protestant Scot to make a big deal of the fact that the Scots came from Ireland, so he tended to play it down. But it is rather surprising because, in other contexts, Scott was very interested in Scottish myth and legend (and did a good deal himself to add to that myth and legend).*

It is in line with his silence over the Irish connection that Sir Walter Scott makes no mention at all of Ted Cowan's candidate for the first real king of the embryo realm of Scotland – Constantin II.

## *Constantin II*

Constantin II was a remarkably long-lived king who was eventually to outlive his effectiveness. In his prime he fought against the vikings encroaching from the north and the west; but he was also determined to extend the boundaries of 'Lesser Scotland' southwards beyond the Forth–Clyde line. In 914, and again in 918, he made inconclusive forays as far south as Corbridge; but now the position in Northumbria was changing dramatically.

The old Anglian kingdom of Northumbria had been overwhelmed by the Norsemen, and King Alfred of Wessex (Alfred the Great) had been forced to partition England in 878, yielding to the Norsemen the huge swatch of east and north England which became known as the Danelaw. Alfred's son (Edward the Elder of Wessex, r.899–924) and grandson (Athelstan, r.924–39) succeeded in turning the tide of Norse domination. By 920, Edward the Elder had won back all the Danelaw south of the Humber. The next target was York, and in 927 the vigorous young Athelstan expelled the Norsemen from their power-base there and assumed the overlordship of Northumbria. Seven years later, in 934, Athelstan consolidated his position in the north of England with a sweeping invasion of Alba, backed by a fleet which harried the east coast as far north as Caithness.

The growing power of Wessex posed an obvious and alarming threat to the fledgling kingdom of Alba, which was also constantly menaced





by the power of the Norse earls of Orkney and Shetland. In 937 Constantin II joined a Great Alliance of the Norsemen in Ireland and the Britons of Strathclyde for a pre-emptive strike against the West Saxons. Together they sailed and marched down to the Humber, a huge host, for a trial of strength with Athelstan. The two sides met at a place called Brunanburh, somewhere on Humberside, perhaps, in a ferocious battle which would be commemorated in contemporary poetry and folk memory as the bloodiest encounter yet fought on English soil:

> *Athelstan the king,*
> *lord of earls*
> *and ring-giver to men,*
> *his brother beside him,*
> *Edmund the Ætheling,*
> *won undying glory*
> *in furious battle*
> *with the blades of their swords*
> *at Brunanburh:*
> *burst through the shield-wall,*
> *hewed at the bucklers*
> *with well-forged swords,*
> *the sons of Edward . . .*
>
> FROM *THE BATTLE OF BRUNANBURH,*
> IN THE *ANGLO-SAXON CHRONICLE* (937)

It was a decisive victory for Athelstan. Among the dead was one of Constantin's sons. The defeat of all his hopes for his kingdom, and the death of his son, seem to have drained the spirit out of Constantin, and in 943 he abdicated and withdrew to monastic life in St Andrews. It was his successors who began to stem the seemingly irresistible Wessex advance. One of his sons, Indulph (r.954–62), managed to capture the formidable stronghold of Edinburgh and gain temporary control of Lothian. But it was not until the next century that the Scots, under the leadership of the forceful and ambitious Malcolm II (Mael Coluim mac Cinaeda, r.1005–34), finally succeeded in wresting control of the Lothians from Northumbria.

The decisive showdown occurred in 1018. Malcolm had already annexed the kingdom of Strathclyde and had shown his mettle with some merciless raids deep into Northumbria, including a siege of Durham on one occasion. The Northumbrians were outraged. They

raised a huge army commanded by warrior prelates pledged to recover the Church lands (and revenues) of Lothian. Malcolm met them with his forces at Carham, just south of the Tweed. It was another fierce encounter, but this time the Scots won the day. Many of the English fell, including a score of Northumbrian nobles and eighteen leading churchmen.

One of the casualties on the Scottish side was Owain, who ruled Strathclyde as a vassal of the Scots. He was the last of his family line, and Malcolm now added the kingdom of Strathclyde (the Britons) to the Scottish realm.[1]

The significance of the Battle of Carham in 1018 was only to emerge later. It was the last battle for Scottish control of the Lothians. Carham marked the first firm delineation of a settled frontier between Scots and English along the line of the River Tweed; but it would be a very long time before this line was to emerge as an accepted final boundary. With the hindsight of history, we can see Carham as a real watershed in the evolution of the shape of 'Scotland' as we know it today.

## *What happened to the Picts?*

> *The Scots and the Picts, after they had been driven back behind the Roman wall, quarrelled and fought between themselves; and at last, after a great many battles, the Scots got completely the better of the Picts. The common people say that the Scots destroyed them entirely; but I think it is not likely that they could kill such great numbers of people.*
>
> TALES OF A GRANDFATHER, CHAPTER I

The fate of the Picts has become the great enigma, the great puzzle of Scottish history; and as a result they are probably the most written about of all the Dark Age peoples, simply because they apparently disappeared, and disappeared very suddenly. Scholars used to write darkly of a terrible chapter of genocide.

It is now accepted that there was no wholesale massacre or enslavement of the people known as the Picts; they simply ceased to exist in the historical record as a separate political and ethnic entity. The old Pictish language was swamped by the Gaelic of the Scots, all the Pictish

1 In his *Tales of a Grandfather* (Chapter I), Walter Scott referred generally to the inhabitants of Scotland encountered by the Romans as 'British', or 'Britons'. The term 'Britons' properly applies specifically to the people of Strathclyde.





written records perished over time, and the use of the characteristic Pictish symbols on monumental sculptured stones fell into disuse. It was a question of assimilation, of integration, not the kind of 'ethnic cleansing' which is such a horrid aspect of some conflicts of modern times.

Ted Cowan has a typically robust attitude to the so-called 'Problem of the Picts':

> *By Page Three of almost any one-volume History of Scotland, the Picts disappear. And it always used to amaze me that nobody asked what on earth happened to them. After all, we are talking about three-quarters of the population of north Britain.*
>
> *In fact, the Picts did not disappear on Page Three. There must have been intermarriage between the Picts and the Scots, there must have been a process of assimilation through the Church and through the common medium of Latin. And this, to my mind, explains the demise of the Picts, their language and their culture better than anything else. What they did leave behind was the magnificent and unique legacy of their sculptured stones.*

There is no better introduction to the exquisite and enigmatic art of the Pictish sculptured stones than the little museum at Meigle, just off the arterial A93 trunk-road near Blairgowrie. The museum is a converted schoolhouse which now contains a marvellous collection of twenty-seven locally-carved stones dating from the ninth and tenth centuries: prayer crosses, symbol stones, sculpted cross-slabs with hunting scenes, animal stones, public war-memorials and personal tombstones. Most of them are decorated with the enigmatic shapes and symbols which no one has yet been able to decipher satisfactorily.

One of the last testimonials of the Picts is the majestic sculptured red sandstone monolith known as 'Sueno's Stone', which stands six metres tall at the eastern edge of the town of Forres, on the Moray Firth, in the heartland of the ancient Pictish kingdom.

'Sueno's Stone' was another of the great problems which the Ancient Monuments Board for Scotland had to tackle in the 1980s. It is a magnificent piece of statuary, with a wealth of intricate carving (pictorial as well as stylised) on all four of its faces. The front bears a relief carving of a great ring-headed cross whose shaft is filled with interlace spiral knotwork; the reverse side depicts an immense battle scene in four panels of unequal length. It is an extraordinarily vivid

and complex sculptural gallery: the top panel presents the leader and his guard arriving on horseback for the battle. The great central panel shows ranks of warriors fighting on foot, then rows of the decapitated bodies of prisoners (their hands still tied) and the executioner holding a severed head, while the enemy flee in disorder. The third panel shows another pile of ruthlessly beheaded corpses and severed heads, while the fourth, partially obscured by the modern base, shows the dispersal of the vanquished army.

By the 1980s it was becoming increasingly difficult to make out the images on the stone (for instance, the heaps of severed heads were barely discernible to the naked eye without recourse to earlier sketches of the stone). Modern atmospheric pollution was creating galloping erosion, which was eating away at the vulnerable sandstone and blurring the detail of the sculptor's art. Something Had To Be Done: Sueno's Stone either had to be moved into safe housing (the Old Tolbooth at Forres?) or given a protective covering *in situ*. The need for a decision was made urgent by plans to alter the line of the A96 from Inverness to bypass the town of Forres: the new road was going to run just a few metres to the north of Sueno's Stone.

It was not an easy decision. The stone had been discovered, fallen and buried under peat, in 1726, and re-erected in its present position on a new circular pedestal. It had become a prominent part of the landscape of Moray.

Eventually, after much heart-searching, the decision was made to leave the stone where it was, and to give it its own protective canopy of reinforced glass and steel – a bit like Snow White in the Disney film (although no prince was expected to come to the rescue). The glass case was erected in 1992, complete with immaculate landscaping, useful interpretive panels and all the technological gizmos needed to provide an environment which would ensure Snow White's survival. Not everyone liked it – it looks incongruous at first glance – but it grows on you. The glass case makes photography difficult, but Historic Scotland is happy to accommodate anyone with a special interest.

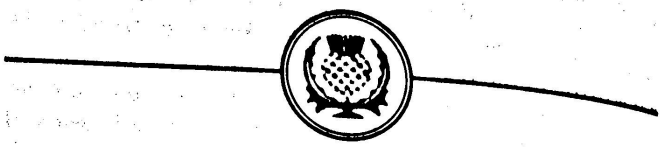
Sueno's Stone is clearly a memorial to some momentous encounter, but there is no 'label' on the stone, and there has been endless speculation about the conflict it was set up to commemorate. The stone cannot be dated, on stylistic grounds, more precisely than the end of the Pictish period (ninth or tenth century); it has none of the characteristic Pictish symbols on it, which suggests that the Pictish sculptors were then working for new masters. The spurious name 'Sueno' was an antiquarian invention of the eighteenth century, referring to some





viking leader with the generic name of 'Svein', and cannot give any clue to the battle depicted on the stone. But to me it seems not unlikely that Sueno's Stone does, indeed, celebrate a real battle, probably some momentous victory against the Picts' and Scots' most formidable adversaries, the vikings. According to the *Annals of Ulster* there was just such a battle in the year 909, when the 'men of Alba' (Albanaich), fighting under their miracle-working standard, the crozier of St Columba, won the day. That date falls within the early years of the reign of Ted Cowan's favourite early king of Scotland, Constantin II, and the battle seems to have led to a treaty whereby the Norsemen were confirmed in their control of Caithness in exchange for a promise to leave the rest of Alba alone.

Academic speculation about the provenance of the stone and the battle it was designed to commemorate will doubtless continue. Whatever the truth of it, I like to think that Sueno's Stone is the last recorded signature of the people who left their mark on history by carving it on stone.



# Chapter 4

## MACBETH (r.1040–57)

*. . . the three old women went and stood by the wayside, in a great moor or heath near Forres, and waited till Macbeth came up. And then, stepping before him as he was marching at the head of his soldiers, the first woman said, 'All hail, Macbeth – hail to thee, Thane of Glamis.' The second said, 'All hail, Macbeth – hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor.' Then the third, wishing to pay him a higher compliment than the other two, said, 'All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be King of Scotland.'*

*TALES OF A GRANDFATHER*, CHAPTER II

The little village of Lumphanan, in Aberdeenshire, lies about fifty kilometres to the west of Aberdeen. It is not as celebrated a name in the Macbeth chronicle as Birnam Wood or Dunsinane Hill in Perthshire, or Forres in Moray, but in fact it is much more significant – because it was at Lumphanan that Macbeth (the historical Macbeth, not the Macbeth of Shakespeare's 'Scottish play') met his death in the year 1057.

What Shakespeare did for Macbeth was to make him perhaps the best known, and certainly the most notorious, character in Scottish history – but at appalling cost to historical veracity. Yet so persuasive is the story, so compelling is the skill of the playwright, so powerful is the characterisation of a noble soul seduced by ambition (and by a ferocious harpy of a wife), that everyone knows it and believes it.

Oddly enough, Sir Walter Scott gave it his imprimatur, too. In his





*Tales of a Grandfather* he related the Shakespeare version wholesale, with some additional embroidery of his own. The puzzle is that Scott knew perfectly well that it was a travesty of events; indeed, in his *History of Scotland* (1829–30), which he wrote as a spin-off from *Tales of a Grandfather*, he gave a very different and much more soberly accurate account. Yet in the *Tales* he preferred to entertain his grandson rather than to educate him. It is a dilemma which faces every 'popular' historian.

According to Shakespeare (and the *Tales of a Grandfather*), Macbeth was a trusted general of the venerable and much-loved King Duncan I of Scotland. With his fellow-general Banquo, Macbeth quells an insurrection and defeats a major viking invasion in Fife. On his way home, on a 'blasted heath' near Forres, he encounters three witches. The first addresses him as Thane of Glamis (a title which he has just inherited). The second addresses him as Thane of Cawdor (which Duncan has just named him, although Macbeth does not know it yet). The third, ominously, addresses him as 'Macbeth! that shalt be king hereafter!' For Banquo, they promise less in the immediate future but much more to come: 'Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none.'

Soon afterwards, messengers arrive to announce that Macbeth is to receive the title and possessions of the Thane of Cawdor, who had been a traitor in the rebellion and is shortly to be executed. Macbeth is thunderstruck: 'Two truths are told,/as happy prologues to the swelling act/of the imperial theme'.

According to Shakespeare, Macbeth now writes a letter to his wife telling her of his encounter with the witches, and sends notice that the king himself is coming to stay with them at their castle at Inverness. Lady Macbeth works on her husband's latent ambition and incites him to kill the king – which he does, albeit unnerved by the deed.[1] Duncan's two young sons, Malcolm (the Prince of Cumbria) and Donalbain, fearful of suffering the same fate, flee the country.

Macbeth thereupon assumes the crown. Mindful of the witches' prophecy that Banquo will be the progenitor of future kings of Scot-

1 Local tradition in Inverness insists that the murdered King Duncan was buried in Culcabock, a village to the east of the town (now a suburb of it). In front of a petrol station on the Old Perth Road, at the junction with Culcabock Avenue, is a stone marked with a plaque which reads: 'Behind is the supposed burial place of King Duncan 1040' – that is to say, underneath the present petrol station. On the opposite side of the road is a 'Duncan's Well' (*Fuaran Dhonnachaidh*). According to this tradition, the king's body was later removed and buried in the royal cemetery on the Holy Island of Iona. In fact, Duncan was killed in battle in Aberdeenshire (see page 60).

land, Macbeth sends hired assassins to kill Banquo and his young son Fleance; Banquo is struck down, but Fleance escapes, and his progeny later become the ruling Stewart dynasty of Scotland.

Macbeth now embarks on a reign of terror. He consults the witches again, and they warn him to beware of Macduff, the Thane of Fife. But they also tell him that 'none of woman born' will ever harm him, and that he 'shall never vanquished be, until/Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill/Shall come against him.'

Before Macbeth has time to act, Macduff, suspecting that he is next on the king's hit-list, flees to England to join Duncan's son Malcolm. In thwarted fury Macbeth sends his assassins to Macduff's castle in Fife and has Macduff's wife and young family slaughtered.

At the English court the Scottish refugees, spurred on by Macduff's arrival, assemble an army with English help and invade Scotland. To hide their advance towards the tyrant's lair at Dunsinane Castle they camouflage themselves with branches cut from Birnam Wood. Macbeth is shaken by the news that the wood seems to be coming to Dunsinane; he is even more dismayed when he faces the vengeful Macduff, who reveals that he was not 'of woman born', but had been 'from his mother's womb untimely ripp'd'. There is nothing left for Macbeth now but to die valiantly: 'Lay on, Macduff; and damn'd be him that first cries, "Hold, enough!"' Macbeth is duly slain by Macduff, who brings the tyrant's head to Malcolm – the future Malcolm III, Malcolm Canmore.

### *Birnam Wood and Dunsinane*

A walkway along the River Tay, known as the 'Terrace Walk', runs between the neighbouring towns of Dunkeld and Birnam. Just behind the Oak Inn of the Birnam House Hotel a sign highlights the presence of the 'Birnam Oak' – a very old, gigantic oak tree, its heavy, brittle branches now propped up on crutches. It is said to be the last remaining tree from the ancient Birnam Wood made famous by the witches' prophecy in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. It was from this very tree (it is implied), and others like it, that Malcolm's soldiers cut branches to disguise their advance on Macbeth's castle at Dunsinane Hill, in the Sidlaws, some twenty-two kilometres as the crow flies to the south-east, off the Perth to Coupar Angus road (A94).[1] Dunsinane is a low hill which is not difficult to ascend. Its flat summit is crowned by the

1 Just for the record (literally), the 'Birnam Oak' stands next to the largest sycamore tree in Britain; it has a height of thirty metres and a girth of eight metres.





impressive remains of a huge prehistoric hill-fort with triple ramparts which are still clearly visible; unfortunately, it could not have been a castle in Macbeth's day. However, from the summit one can look north-west along the Tay Valley towards the woods of Birnam and the beautiful Howe of Strathmore, and (with luck and a little imagination) make out the gap in the hills through which a camouflaged army might have advanced towards Dunsinane. Or so they say.

A few miles to the south of Dunkeld, and now bypassed by the A9 to Perth, the little village of Bankfoot provides a 'Macbeth Experience' as part of a Visitor Centre which was created in a former motor museum in 1993 by an entrepreneurial local couple, Wilson and Catriona Girvan. A spirited multi-media production offers a view of the 'millennium of mystery' surrounding the Macbeth story, or rather two views – the Shakespearean view, and the 'real' view. It presents Shakespeare enthusiastically reading his source material – the English chronicler Ralph Holinshed, who compiled *The Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* in the 1570s – and penning his 'pretty tale' of the witch-ridden, bloodthirsty usurper who lost his head to Macduff when Birnam Wood came to Dunsinane; interwoven with this yarn is the story of what is now considered the 'real' Macbeth.

In this story, Macbeth was one of the great Scottish kings. His name in Gaelic, MacBeathadh, means 'Son of Life'. He was the son of Findlaech mac Ruairdri, *mormaer* (earl) of Moray, who was killed by his nephews in 1020; Macbeth had royal blood in his veins as a member of one of the three kindreds of Dalriada (Argyll) who had extended their power up the Great Glen into Moray. In 1032 Macbeth took vengeance when he burned to death one of his father's killers, Gillacomgain, along with fifty of his men, and was thereby able to assume his father's rank of *mormaer* of Moray. He then strengthened his claim to the throne by marrying the dead man's widow, Gruoch, who was herself descended from the royal line.

In the same vein, Duncan I was not by any means Shakespeare's gentle, much-revered king, rich in years and loved by his subjects. He was, in fact, a rash and militarily incompetent youngster, the grandson of a ruthless and despotic king, Malcolm II, who had appointed him Prince of Cumbria and arranged that he should succeed to the throne in 1034. His succession caused widespread anger: ancient custom favoured succession by election, not *diktat*; besides, Duncan had neither the maturity nor the track-record to merit the throne.

Duncan had clearly inherited his father's ambition, but not his skill: he invaded the north of England and made a disastrous attack on

Durham in 1039; he then made an equally ill-fated attempt to impose his authority in the recalcitrant north of Scotland. Duncan met Macbeth, *mormaer* of Moray, in battle somewhere near the village of Pitgaveny, near Elgin, on the Feast of the Assumption (10 August) in 1040, and was killed.

Macbeth was immediately accepted as King of Scots and crowned at Scone, which suggests that Duncan I's military failures had antagonised his subjects in the south, too. Macbeth went on to reign for seventeen years (1040–57), and the *Chronicle of Melrose* noted that 'in his time there were productive seasons' (a line borrowed from an early Latin poem – *fertile tempus erat*). He drove Duncan's two sons out of Scotland: Malcolm fled to England, where he became a protégé of King Edward the Confessor (r.1042–66); and Donalbain (Donald Bán) fled to the Western Isles.

Macbeth was able to deal effectively with an abortive attempt by Duncan I's father to oust him in 1046. He was less successful in his confrontations with his half-cousin, Thorfinn the Mighty, the Norse Earl of Orkney.

Thorfinn Sigurðarson, nicknamed 'the Mighty', is one of the most compelling figures in the great portrait-gallery of Norse earls presented in *Orkneyinga Saga*. A huge, powerfully-built, swarthy man, ugly and sharp-featured, beetle-browed and with a prominent nose, he was ambitious, ruthless and very shrewd, a born survivor in an age when survival was always precarious. According to *Orkneyinga Saga* Thorfinn was one of the sons of Earl Sigurð Hlöðvisson of Orkney, and (like Duncan I) a grandson of a King Malcolm of Scotland (Malcolm II?). He was created Earl of Caithness and Sutherland by King Malcolm at the age of five in 1014; thereafter he fought his way to control of Orkney (by the 1030s), and by the time he died, at some date between 1057 and 1065, he had extended his realm deep into the heartlands of Scotland and over the Western Isles as well, and was recognised as the most powerful ruler in northern Britain. He was a man of compelling personal authority; after the turbulent years of his early piratical reign, he spent the latter part of his life ruling his realms wisely and benevolently from the palace and church he built on the Brough of Birsay, at the northern end of the Mainland of Orkney. His reign was the high point of the golden age of viking power in the north.

This was the man who represented the greatest threat to Macbeth's authority in the north of Scotland. According to *Orkneyinga Saga*, Macbeth and Thorfinn had several encounters, all of which ended in Thorfinn's favour. But it would say that, wouldn't it?





Macbeth may not have been the most compelling King of Scots in the eleventh century, but he seems to have been a very capable one. He was generous to the Church, which ensured him a good early press (he and Gruoch granted lands in Fife to the Culdees of Loch Leven[1]). Certainly, he felt secure enough to leave Scotland in 1050 and go on a pilgrimage to Rome where, according to the *Chronicon* of Marianus Scottus (1028–83), written in 1073, 'he scattered his money like seed among the poor'.

In the 1050s, however, Macbeth's reign became clouded. Duncan's elder son, Malcolm – the future Malcolm Canmore – was cultivating support in England to reclaim the throne of Scotland. Edward the Confessor seems to have backed his ambitions. In 1054 he sanctioned an invasion of Scotland by Earl Siward, the doughty Danish-born Earl of Northumbria. Siward (probably with Malcolm at his side) invaded Scotland with a mixed army of Anglo-Saxon Northumbrians and Scots. Macbeth seems to have conducted a defensive guerrilla campaign at first; the contemporary English chronicle *Vita Edwardi Regis* claims that the Scots were 'an uncertain race of men and fickle, and one which trusts rather in woods than on the plain, and more in flight than in manly courage in battle'. Siward reached Dundee apparently unopposed, where his army was reinforced by supply ships. Shortly afterwards he brought Macbeth to pitched battle on the Festival of the Seven Sleepers (27 July).

Where was this battle? Was this Shakespeare's final 'Battle of Dunsinane'? It could well have been – there is no documentary evidence either way. But if it was at Dunsinane, it would have been decided on the level ground below Dunsinane Hill, not in the ancient hill-fort on the summit.

Wherever it took place, it was a long and bloody encounter. There were heavy casualties on both sides. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 1054 noted:

> *In this year Earl Siward invaded Scotland with a great host both by land and sea, and fought against the Scots. He put to flight their king, Macbeth, and slew the noblest in the land, carrying off much plunder such as none had previously gained; but his son Osbern and his sister's son and numbers of his housecarles, as well as of the king [Edward the Confessor], were slain there.*

1 The Culdees (*Cele dei*, 'Friends of God') formed early monastic communities which attached themselves to hereditary secular priests.

'He put to flight their king, Macbeth'. The one historical fact we can be absolutely sure of, *pace* Shakespeare and Walter Scott, is that Macbeth was not killed at Dunsinane in 1054.

For the next three years the records are silent. Siward's victory had not been enough to give Malcolm the throne; Siward had to return to Northumbria to deal with an uprising there, and died soon afterwards. Malcolm seems to have been installed by Edward the Confessor as ruler over Strathclyde and the Lothians, but no more. Macbeth retreated northward, back to his original power-base in Moray. By 1057, however, his support seems to have been draining away, and Malcolm felt strong enough to seek out his enemy on his home ground.

The chronicles say that the fugitive Macbeth was eventually hunted down by Malcolm near the village of Lumphanan, in Aberdeenshire, and killed there in a desperate final stand rather than a pitched battle. His head was then brought to Malcolm, either on a pole or a golden platter.

There is nothing like local tradition to keep historical memory alive, however embroidered it might have become. At Lumphanan, which lies on the A980 between Banchory and Alford, the epicentre of the tradition is the nearby Peel Ring of Lumphanan, which is signposted. The Peel was once a medieval Anglo-Norman fortified motte-and-bailey;[1] now all that remains of it is a large grassy mound surrounded by a swampy moat, with an encircling earthwork. A convenient path offers easy access to the crown of the mound. In the fifteenth century, a local worthy had built himself a stone residence there – Ha'ton House – which was abandoned in the eighteenth century. The Peel has long been linked with Macbeth's last stand; unfortunately, it dates from the early thirteenth century – nearly two hundred years after Macbeth's death.

Other features in the district are traditionally associated with the demise of Macbeth, but it takes a very determined pilgrim to track them down. On Perk Hill on the farmlands north of the village, clearly visible from the road, there lies a ruined Bronze Age cairn girdled by a guard of honour of beech trees. It is known locally as 'Macbeth's Cairn'. The farmer is quite happy to permit access, although he cannot fathom why anyone should want to trek across his fields to visit it.

1 'Motte-and-bailey' is the term used for an early Anglo-Norman fortification consisting of a timber tower raised on an artificial mound. The word 'motte' comes from Old French, meaning mound, and the 'bailey' was the fortified courtyard within the surrounding ditch or moat. In English, 'motte' came to mean the moat rather than the mound.





The site was roughly excavated in 1855 and was found to contain the bones of someone who had died three thousand years earlier. It has nothing at all to do with Macbeth; indeed, the early chroniclers say that Macbeth was buried, like so many Kings of Scots before him, on the holy island of Iona.

There is also an even less accessible 'Macbeth's Stone', unmarked, where the king's head is alleged to have been severed from his body. It is the largest of a group of boulders on top of a grassy slope on Cairnbeathie Farm, on the west side of the disused railway embankment.

And there is (of course!) an unmarked 'Macbeth's Well', at Burnside, near the parish church to the north-east. It is practically invisible – a small and very low stone lintel set into the base of a steep and overgrown bank at the roadside. There is no hope of finding it without a friendly and particularly knowledgeable local guide – the casual visitor would drive or even walk right past it without spotting it. An incongruous plastic hose-pipe now drips into the well. This is where the doomed monarch is said to have quenched his thirst before the final encounter.

Wherever Macbeth died, and wherever his body ended up, his death did not automatically give Malcolm the throne. Macbeth's remaining supporters in the north proclaimed as King of Scots his stepson, Lulach (the son of Gruoch from a previous marriage). Lulach appears in history under the unflattering nickname of 'Lulach the Simpleton'. Simpleton or not, he too was hunted down by Malcolm, and killed in March 1058 in an ambush at Essie (now Rhynie) in Strathbogie, the strategic pass between Moray and Strathdon. Lulach, too, was buried on Iona.

With Lulach dead, Malcolm's hold on the kingdom was at last secure. A month later he was crowned at Scone at the age of twenty-seven, and embarked on his thirty-five-year reign as King of Scots (see Chapter 5).

## *Shakespeare and Scott*

So what were Shakespeare, and Sir Walter Scott following him, playing at? Why did they present such an extraordinarily biased view of Macbeth?

Shakespeare had not simply made it all up; nor had Holinshed in his *Chronicle*. The denigration of Macbeth had started much earlier, by John of Fordun in *Chronica Gentis Scotorum* (Chronicle of the

Scottish People), his proto-version of the *Scotichronicon* around 1380;[1] here Macbeth is portrayed as an evil murderer and usurper. Andrew Wyntoun, prior of St Serf's in Loch Leven and author of the metrical *Origynale Cronikil of Scotland* in vernacular Scots around 1420, introduced the witches and the advancing Birnam Wood and the theme of 'unnatural birth'. It seems clear that conflicting stories about Macbeth and Malcolm were current soon after Macbeth's reign: pro-Macbeth stories in the heartlands of Moray, and anti-Macbeth stories which were nurtured by the court propagandists of the victorious Canmore dynasty. These were the tales which Holinshed relied upon in his *Chronicle*.

Did Shakespeare believe what he read in Holinshed? For a playwright, it scarcely mattered – he must have found Holinshed extraordinarily convenient. He wrote *Macbeth* in the period around 1606, soon after the Union of the Crowns of 1603 which had brought King James VI of Scotland to London as King James I of England as well. James was the latest of the Stewart dynasty of Scotland, and Banquo (who seems to have been an invented character) was, providentially, the legendary progenitor of the Stewart monarchy. What more flattering than such a theme for a play presented by The King's Men to welcome the new incumbent of the throne? Shakespeare was in no way averse to twisting history for political ends: ten years earlier he had played fast and loose with the story of *Richard III* to celebrate the first of the Tudors, Henry VII, in order to please his demanding royal patron, Queen Elizabeth.

It was also well known that King James VI and I was deeply interested in witchcraft – his book on *Daemonologie*, first published in Edinburgh in 1597, had been republished in London on his accession in 1603. Furthermore, the mere fact that Macbeth had caused the death of a reigning king made him automatically, in Elizabethan eyes, a regicide and a usurper, even though kingship in Macbeth's day was decided by election, not inheritance – as the succession had been in England at the death of Edward the Confessor in 1066.

There was less immediate excuse for Walter Scott, however. Ted Cowan says:

1 John of Fordun (c.1320–84) has often been called 'the Father of Scottish History'. Not a great deal is known about him; he is believed to have been a chantry priest at Aberdeen Cathedral, and may have come from Fordoun in the Mearns. His history was a compilation of (now lost) earlier historical writings on Scotland and took the story down to 1383. His work formed the basis of the *Scotichronicon* of Walter Bower, which was written in the 1440s.





> *The Macbeth episode in* Tales of a Grandfather *has always puzzled me because Scott simply regurgitated the plot of Shakespeare's play. His account gives the impression of Macbeth the usurper, Macbeth the barbarian king, Macbeth the tyrant who would massacre his own subjects, and so on; yet Scott knew that this was far from the historical truth – if there is such a thing as historical truth!*
>
> *Scott was perhaps trying to set up a contrast between the disappearing old Celtic world and the wonderful new world of the Normans as portrayed in* Ivanhoe *and other novels; he was personifying the dissolution of Celtic Scotland in the figure of Macbeth. That may be all right in literary or artistic terms, but it is certainly not legitimate in strictly historical terms.*

So *Tales of a Grandfather* presents the demise of Macbeth as a happy prelude to the normanisation and ultimate anglicisation of Scotland to come. For pro-Unionist historians like Scott, the denigration of Macbeth reflected a profound distaste for the ancient role of Celtic culture in the Lowland Scotland of his day; for Scott, any relevance it might have had was overshadowed by the emerging Norman (i.e. civilising) influence which was to begin in the reign of Malcolm Canmore. Not that Scott himself would have admitted to any such notion; in his *History of Scotland* he showed clearly that he was aware of the historical inaccuracies of Shakespeare's plot:

> *All these things are now known: but the mind retains pertinaciously the impression made by the impositions of genius. While the works of Shakespeare are read, and the English language subsists, History may say what she will, but the general reader will only recollect Macbeth as a sacrilegious usurper, and Richard [III] as a deformed murtherer.*

It is only in much more recent times that Macbeth has been rehabilitated as the champion of the Men of Moray and the last truly Celtic king of Scotland.

But there was another player in the Macbeth drama whom Shakespeare did not mention at all – Thorfinn the Mighty, Earl of Orkney. The sources about Thorfinn's life (both Icelandic and Scottish) are tantalisingly elusive about his real impact on Scottish affairs – so elusive, indeed, that the eminent Scottish historical novelist Dorothy Dunnett was able to create a brilliantly plausible scenario from them

in her novel *King Hereafter* (1982). Her thesis was that Macbeth and Thorfinn were in reality the same person, known as Thorfinn in Orkney and Macbeth in Scotland. It may sound outrageously unlikely, but . . .

*Orkneyinga Saga* relates that on the Feast of the Assumption (10 August) in 1040 – the very day on which Macbeth defeated Duncan near the village of Pitgaveny in Aberdeenshire – Thorfinn defeated a King of Scots called 'Karl Hundason' in battle at a fortified site the saga called Torfnes, somewhere on the northern coast of Scotland. It is impossible to identify the site with any certainty, but circumstantial evidence suggests that 'Torfnes' may well have been a name for the large and important fortification at modern Burghead, on the north Moray coast, near Elgin. Meanwhile John of Fordun's early version of the *Scotichronicon* relates an old Scottish tradition that after Duncan's death at Pitgaveny in 1040, his body was taken to Elgin; it was this tradition which, two centuries later, in 1235, inspired King Alexander II to found a chapel in the cathedral church in Elgin where masses were sung for Duncan's soul.

In the year 1050, when Macbeth went on his pilgrimage to Rome, *Orkneyinga Saga* tells us that Thorfinn the Mighty went to Rome as well. Was it pure coincidence that these two rulers should choose the same year in which to absent themselves from their respective warring domains for such a long time? Thereafter, according to the saga, Thorfinn maintained good relations with the Scottish court.

There are just as many inconsistencies as coincidences between the stories of Thorfinn and Macbeth, of course. According to *Orkneyinga Saga*, for instance, Thorfinn died peacefully in Orkney and was buried in his beloved minster of Christchurch on the Brough of Birsay; whereas Macbeth, as we have heard, was buried on Iona. But both the saga and the Scottish sources agree that Thorfinn was married to Ingibjörg, the daughter of Earl Finn Arnason of Norway, and that after Thorfinn's death she married Malcolm III – Macbeth's conqueror and successor as King of Scots. Intriguing, isn't it?



# *Chapter 5*

## MALCOLM CANMORE AND ST MARGARET

*Malcolm III, called Canmore (or Great Head) . . . was a brave and wise prince, though without education. He often made war upon King William the Conqueror of England, and upon his son and successor William, who, from his complexion, was called William Rufus, that is, Red William.*

*TALES OF A GRANDFATHER*, CHAPTER IV

The accession of Malcolm Canmore in 1058 marked the end of what Michael Lynch has called 'the crisis of the mac Alpin succession' (*Scotland: A New History*). It also marked the start of a highly formative period in the development of 'Scotland' as a modern state; in particular, Scotland's boundaries along the lines we recognise today began to take shape now (apart from the later inclusion of the Northern Isles). For the next 230 years, until the death of Alexander III in 1286 (see Chapter 8), the throne of Scotland was occupied by a powerful royal dynasty which is called variously the 'Canmore Dynasty' or the 'House of Dunkeld'. In comparison with preceding centuries, and with what was to come during the 'Wars of Independence', this was to be a period of considerable prosperity and relative peace.

Malcolm III, who reigned for thirty-five years (1058–93), has come down in history with a mixed reputation. Commentators have made much mock of his Gaelic nickname: 'Canmore' is from the Gaelic *ceann mòr*, meaning 'Great Chief', but it is frequently translated as 'Big-head'. Nigel Tranter, in *The Story of Scotland*, called him 'some-

thing of a boor, bloodthirsty and without statesmanlike qualities. His one delight was in raiding, pillage, slaughter.' The historical records, however, are too scanty to justify such a sweeping judgement.

Malcolm's chief preoccupation throughout his reign was the consolidation and extension of his kingdom of 'Scotia', or 'Alba'. Thorfinn the Mighty, Earl of Orkney, died some time between 1057 and 1065 (it is, alas, impossible to be sure of the precise date), and with his death his widespread empire in the north, which was said in *Orkneyinga Saga* to have included nine earldoms on the mainland of Scotland, began to disintegrate. Malcolm helped the process by marrying Thorfinn's widow, Ingibjörg; some sources say that Ingibjörg was Thorfinn's daughter, not his widow, but no matter. Before her death, some time before 1069, Ingibjörg bore Malcolm two sons: Duncan (the future King Duncan II) and Donald (d.1085); more importantly, however, the marriage helped to neutralise or at least diminish the insistent pressure on Scotland from the north.

Malcolm's main objective was to seize the perennially debatable lands of Northumbria and Cumbria. At this time there was no recognised border between the kingdoms of 'Scotland' and 'England'; and once again the events in England were to provide an opportunity for an ambitious and energetic King of Scots. After the death in 1055 of Earl Siward of Northumbria, who had helped Malcolm gain a foothold in Scotland in 1054, the new earl was a Wessex warlord named Tostig (the half-brother of the future King Harold Godwinsson who would die at Hastings). During Tostig's absence abroad in 1061, Malcolm launched a major raid into Northumbria. It was the first of no fewer than five incursions into the north of England which he was to make during his reign – none with lasting success, and the last, in 1093, at the cost of his life.

But Malcolm Canmore will always be overshadowed, in Scottish eyes at least, by the woman who became his second queen sometime between 1069 and 1071: Margaret, a princess of the old Saxon royal house, who would become Scotland's only royal saint.

### *Queen Margaret, the Saint*

At the summit of the citadel of Edinburgh Castle stands a tiny, simple building which is the oldest surviving structure in the castle: St Margaret's Chapel. It was built in the 1130s or 1140s by Margaret's youngest son, King David I (see Chapter 6), and dedicated to his mother, who had died in the castle in 1093. It began as a private





oratory for the royal family; in the sixteenth century it passed out of use as a chapel and was converted into a gunpowder magazine. Its original purpose was rediscovered in 1845 and it was restored to its present condition. It is now a very popular venue for weddings and christenings: castle guides tell visitors, tongue in cheek, that it is the ideal place for a Scottish wedding, for it only holds twenty people and the bride's father can have the reception in the telephone box on the way down!

The interior is as charming as the exterior is austere. The semi-circular chancel at the east end which housed the altar now has stained-glass windows depicting St Andrew and St Ninian. St Columba is represented, too, as is William Wallace in full battle array. But pride of place goes to St Margaret herself, flaxen-haired and beautiful, flanked by handmaidens at their sewing and holding an open book on her lap.

Margaret arrived in Scotland as a direct result of the Norman Conquest of 1066. She was of the English royal family which was swept aside by William of Normandy. Born in Hungary about the year 1047, she was a granddaughter of Edmund Ironside (half-brother of Edward the Confessor, r.1042–66), who had been killed resisting the conquest of England in 1016 by the Danish king Knút (Canute); she was the daughter of Edmund's son Edward, who had married a Hungarian princess during his long exile in Hungary but died soon after the family's return to England in 1057; and she was the sister of Prince Edgar ('Edgar the Atheling'), whose claims to the throne at the death of the childless Edward the Confessor early in 1066 were passed over in favour of the warrior Harold Godwinsson.

After the Conquest, William the Conqueror treated Edgar and his family well, despite the fact that Edgar had been, rather optimistically, declared king-elect after Harold's death at Hastings. But this cosy state of affairs did not last long, and in 1068, after an abortive rebellion in the north of England which he supported, Edgar tried to escape back to the greater safety of Hungary with his mother and two sisters, Margaret and Christina. Their ship, bound for the Continent, was driven off course by gales to Scotland and made land in Fife in a small bay now called St Margaret's Hope (Inlet).

The story goes that Malcolm Canmore, now a forty-year-old widower, rode from his residence at Dunfermline to welcome the royal refugees to Scotland; he fell instantly in love with the young Princess Margaret, who was then in her early twenties, and within a few months he married her in Dunfermline.

Be that as it may, it was clearly a good political marriage. From Edgar's point of view, it meant becoming brother-in-law to a formidable warrior King of Scots who could provide him with powerful support against the Norman 'usurpers' in England. For Malcolm, Margaret brought not just an alliance with the old royal house of England, but also a significant dowry in the form of the rich treasures which King Stephen of Hungary had given to her mother.

> *She was an excellent woman, and of such a gentle, amiable disposition, that she often prevailed upon her husband, who was a fierce, passionate man, to lay aside his resentment, and forgive those who had offended him.*
>
> *TALES OF A GRANDFATHER*, CHAPTER IV

Sir Walter Scott's picture of Queen Margaret as a Saxon diamond among Celtic dross is the conventional image of her which has come down in history. Margaret's confessor in Scotland was a chaplain named Turgot (subsequently the first Roman, as opposed to Celtic, Bishop of St Andrews), who wrote a vivid biography of her soon after her death. In Turgot's account she emerges as a determined and saintly woman who dominated her brash but doting husband who was so besotted with her that, although illiterate himself, he would kiss her devotional books and have them bound with gold and jewels.

As is to be expected in a biography which was also a hagiography, Turgot placed huge emphasis on the saintly queen's piety. She enjoyed the rich trappings of royalty, but she also spent many hours in prayer, and fed the poor regularly and washed their feet. Soon after her marriage she attended to the building of a small Romanesque church at Dunfermline, and three Benedictine monks were sent at her request from Canterbury to form the nucleus of a Benedictine priory there. She restored the church on Iona and was a benefactress of St Andrews, where she revived the cult of St Andrew and encouraged pilgrims to go there by giving them free passage across the Forth – the names of South and North Queensferry, on either side of the estuary of the Forth, still carry the memory of this initiative. Her devotion to the Roman Church which had embraced her during her childhood in Hungary was undoubtedly significant in the struggle between the doctrines and formulas of the Celtic Church of Scotland, founded by St Columba, and the established practice of the Universal Catholic Church in which she had been reared.

Apart from the influence she may have had on spiritual matters in





Scotland, Margaret has also been credited with, or blamed for, the anglicisation of the court and culture of southern Scotland:

> *a very great number of the Saxons who fled from the cruelty of William the Conqueror, retired into Scotland, and this had a considerable effect in civilizing the southern parts of that country; for if the Saxons were inferior to the Normans in arts and in learning, they were, on the other hand, much superior to the Scots, who were a rude and very ignorant people... No doubt, the number of the Saxons thus introduced into Scotland, tended much to improve and civilize the manners of the people...*
>
> *TALES OF A GRANDFATHER*, CHAPTER IV

Walter Scott never missed a chance to rub in his view that the Scots of medieval times were a decidedly backward people compared with their southern neighbours. But certainly at this time, in the latter half of the eleventh century, Scotland can be seen to be moving from a Gaelic-speaking realm of semi-autonomous princedoms to a much more centralised monarchy on the English and Continental model. If Macbeth was the last truly Celtic King of Scots, as some claim, it is because during Malcolm's reign there was a greater intermingling of the Celtic and Anglo-Norman cultures and *mores*.

It was perhaps on the future of Scotland and Anglo–Scottish relations, rather than on their present, that Queen Margaret had most effect – through the children she had by Malcolm. She gave birth to six pious sons, three of whom would reign successively as Kings of Scots: Edgar (r.1097–1107), Alexander I (r.1107–24) and David I (r.1124–53). She also had two daughters, both of whom married into the English royal house: Edith, the elder, married William the Conqueror's son, Henry I of England (r.1100–35), and became known in England as the Empress Matilda (see below); and Mary, the younger, married Eustace, Count of Boulogne, and their daughter (also named Matilda, or Maud) married Stephen of Blois, who was King of England from 1135 to 1164.

## *The border issue*

Malcolm's marriage connection with a claimant to the English throne may well have added fuel to his ambitions to extend his own kingdom by attacking Northumbria, allegedly on Edgar the Atheling's behalf. His first opportunity came in 1070. Northumbria had fiercely resisted

the Norman conquest of southern England, and had been savagely punished by King William. Malcolm launched his own invasion, ostensibly to help the English rebels, but it did little more than add to the cruel devastation of Yorkshire.

King William recognised the danger to the security of England posed by Malcolm's aggression. In 1072 he invaded Scotland with a large, well-organised army, supported by a fleet; it was the first full-scale invasion of Scotland since Roman times. William marched through Lothian and across the River Forth at Stirling, and went on to the River Tay. Malcolm realised that his own forces were no match for the powerful host of Norman knights and men-at-arms, and refused to give battle. Frustrated by Malcolm's delaying tactics, William offered to talk terms at Abernethy on the Tay. The treaty which resulted is known in English sources as the 'Abernethy Submission': Malcolm apparently submitted to William – 'he gave hostages and was his man'. He agreed not to harbour the English king's enemies (for instance, Edgar the Atheling), and surrendered his eldest son, Duncan (by Ingibjörg of Orkney), as a hostage. But was it a formal act of homage by a King of Scots as a vassal of England – or was Malcolm only recognising English suzerainty of the disputed lands of Cumbria and Northumbria? Ted Cowan believes that the idea of the King of Scots accepting the overlordship or 'feudal superiority' of the English king was a later fabrication by English chroniclers, designed to reinforce English claims to be rulers of Scotland; certainly, the 'Abernethy Submission' would remain a bone of contention between English and Scots constitutional lawyers for centuries to come.

Malcolm did not consider himself bound by it in any way. In 1079, when Norman control of the north of England was precarious once more, Malcolm invaded again – but again with no other result than a retaliatory invasion from England, led this time by William's son, Robert Curthose. Malcolm, again, refused battle, and at Falkirk the terms of the Abernethy Treaty (such as they were) were renewed. It also seems that a border was agreed, stretching between the Solway and the Tyne. Certainly, it was immediately after the Falkirk meeting that Robert Curthose commissioned the building of a 'New Castle' on the Tyne. It was a motte-and-bailey, and was the foundation of modern Newcastle. The border was reinforced in 1091, after yet another incisive incursion against Durham and a counter-incursion into Lothian, this time led by William's successor on the throne of England, his son William Rufus (William II). William II took Carlisle and temporarily robbed the Scots of that part of ancient Cumbria which lay south of





the Solway; he consolidated the western end of the 'border' by ordering the building of the first castle at Carlisle.

## *The death of Malcolm*

There was to be one more Scottish invasion of Northumbria. In November 1093 Malcolm Canmore, stung (it is said) by some calculated insult from William II, or irritated by the building of Carlisle Castle, gathered another army and marched south on a last furious raid, accompanied by his eldest son by Margaret, Edward. It was a grievous miscalculation. Near the castle of Alnwick he was ambushed by the Norman Earl of Northumbria, Robert de Mowbray, and was killed, along with his son Edward – by treachery, it was subsequently claimed.

Malcolm had left Queen Margaret on her sickbed in Edinburgh Castle when he set off on his last expedition to Northumbria. According to her biographer, Turgot, she had foreseen that it would have disastrous consequences. For consolation she sent for the 'Black Rood' – a fragment of the True Cross encased in a cross of gold, with an ivory image of Christ upon it, the most precious of the treasures she had brought from Hungary.

The news of her husband's and son's deaths was too much for her, and three days later, on 16 November 1093, she died. Malcolm's death prompted fears of a palace coup. Margaret's body was taken from Edinburgh Castle in great secrecy, through the west postern gate, and ferried across the Forth to Dunfermline, where she was buried in the little church she had founded there.

Standing in the soaring sonorities of Dunfermline Abbey today, it is difficult to visualise the small church where Margaret was first laid to rest. On the floor of the nave are some brass strips which mark the outlines of parts of an early church whose foundations were uncovered during excavations in 1916, and grilles in the floor allow glimpses of the stonework. It was Margaret's youngest son, King David I (r.1124–53), who rebuilt the first church as a major abbey, the most splendid ecclesiastical building of its time in Scotland; it was consecrated in 1150.

Margaret's manifest piety throughout her life soon made Dunfermline a place of pilgrimage after her death. It was clearly of great advantage to the ruling Canmore dynasty to have a saint on its books, and her canonisation was vigorously promoted. It eventually came about in 1250, in time to add lustre to the inauguration of Alexander III the previous year (see Chapter 8), and her body was moved to a new shrine in a chapel specially built to receive it near the High Altar.

## *Aftermath*

***After the death of Malcolm Canmore, the Scottish crown was occupied successively by three princes of little power or talent, who seized on the supreme authority because the children of the deceased sovereign were under age.***

*TALES OF A GRANDFATHER*, CHAPTER IV

Malcolm Canmore's death threw Scotland into a virtual civil war. From his refuge in the Western Isles, where he had been living since Macbeth had killed his father Duncan I, came Malcolm's younger brother Donald bàn (Shakespeare's 'Donalbain'), who now, at the age of sixty, claimed the vacant throne and was crowned as Donald III. It was the Celtic backlash against the anglicisation of the court: his accession seems to have been backed by the native aristocracy, who had come to resent the foreign influences associated with Queen Margaret. According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry for the year 1093, 'the Scots drove out all the English who had been with King Malcolm'. Certainly, the surviving children of Malcolm Canmore and St Margaret fled to the English court for safety, led by the eldest son Edgar and including the youngest, the ten-year-old David – the future King David I.

There was another claimant to the throne of Scotland – the royal prince who had been surrendered as a hostage by his father to William the Conqueror at Abernethy twenty years earlier: Duncan, Malcolm Canmore's son by Ingibjörg of Orkney. He had been brought up at the English court, and had been formally released, and knighted, on William the Conqueror's death in 1087. Here was an obvious opportunity for King William II of England to make his presence felt in Scotland again. Duncan was now a fully 'normanised' Celt, a protégé who had sworn fealty to the English king. According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 1093, 'Duncan came to the king, and gave such pledges as the king demanded of him and, with his consent, went to Scotland.' With the help of an English and French army he ousted Donald III and was accepted as King of Scots as Duncan II – but only on condition that he dismissed his alien supporters. It was a fatal promise: before the year was out he had been murdered (November 1094), and Donald III resumed his interrupted reign.

William Rufus was not to be balked, however. He had another claimant to the Scottish throne up his sleeve: Malcolm Canmore's fourth son by Margaret, Edgar, who had fled to his court in 1093. In





1097 William sent Edgar to Scotland as his vassal at the head of another army. This time there was to be no slip-up. Donald III was soundly defeated, hunted down and captured, then blinded and thrown into a dungeon. When he died, he was the last King of Scots to be buried on Iona.

The accession of King Edgar in 1097 heralded a remarkable span of rule by three men of the same generation, the three youngest sons of Malcolm Canmore and Queen Margaret, who gave Scotland's relationship with England a new stability: Edgar, Alexander I and David I.

Edgar was known as 'the Peaceable'. He made no resistance when Magnús Barelegs (*berfœttr*), king of Norway, made a violent onslaught on the Western Isles and confirmed Norwegian sovereignty there, leaving the sacred island of Iona in ruins again. There were no rebellions or uprisings against Edgar's rule. He never married, and had no children; when he died in 1107 he bequeathed his kingdom to his younger brothers Alexander (as monarch) and David (as ruler of southern Lothian and Strathclyde).

In contrast to his 'peaceable' elder brother, Alexander I was known as 'the Fierce', perhaps because of the severity of his suppression of a rebellion in Moray and the Mearns. Apart from that he was a devout man who showed all the signs of his strictly pious upbringing by his mother, Queen Margaret. Like his brother Edgar he was a vassal of the English king, Henry I (r.1100–35); Henry was the youngest (and only English-born) son of William the Conqueror, and the husband of Alexander's sister Edith (Matilda). Alexander I now married his brother-in-law's illegitimate daughter Sibyl, and his vassalage to England seemed to be confirmed in 1114 when he participated in an English campaign in Wales. His reign is particularly remembered, however, for his encouragement of monastic orders. He brought Augustinian canons from England to found priories at Scone and at Inchcolm in the Firth of Forth, and made plans for Augustinian foundations at the ancient Celtic royal centres of Dunkeld and St Andrews. He died at Stirling in April 1124 without legitimate issue, and was buried with his parents in the church at Dunfermline which his mother had founded.

To what extent was Scotland being 'normanised', as England had been? Some commentators have seen the accession of Edgar in 1097 as Scotland's equivalent of England's Norman Conquest. Dauvit Brown disagrees:

*There was no Norman Conquest of Scotland, as such. In England, simply and spectacularly, the Normans conquered the kingdom; the native aristocracy were largely dispossessed, or at least fell down a few rungs in the social ladder. In the case of Scotland, however, the Normans came by invitation: the Scottish kings themselves invited the Norman knights into their kingdom, and not necessarily from England – for instance, there were Norman knights fighting in Macbeth's defeated army at the Battle of Dunsinane in 1054. They were given, as grants from the king, positions of authority in some regions or in the court; these Norman knights represented the latest in military technology, and they were an important element in the attempt to consolidate and extend control of the kingdom.*

*The kings who succeeded Macbeth were trying to do something really new: they were aligning themselves with the major social and cultural forces in western Europe, especially the reform of the Church which was being promoted by the papacy from the middle of the eleventh century. They promoted this in their own kingdom by establishing monasteries staffed by monks and nuns of the brand-new religious orders which were part of the mood of the day.*

*The other major force in western Europe was the French knightly culture which came to Scotland with the Norman knights. The Scottish kings were themselves part of this culture; they, too, were knights, and in due course the major members of the Gaelic aristocracy, first in the east and later in the west, also became fully-fledged knights.*

What was happening in Scotland was not a simple clash between the old, kin-based values of Gaeldom and the new-fangled feudal ideas of the Normans; rather, it was a gradual melding of the old and the new.

The death of Alexander I left the way open for his brother David to ascend the throne at the age of about forty: David I (r.1124–53), the man who could never have expected to become King of Scots.



# Chapter 6

## DAVID I (r.1124–53)

*David was a most excellent sovereign . . . He founded bishoprics, and built and endowed many monasteries, which he vested with large grants of lands out of the patrimony of the kings . . . He had many furious wars with England, and made dreadful incursions into the neighbouring provinces, which were the more easy that the country of England was then disunited by civil war.*

*TALES OF A GRANDFATHER*, CHAPTER IV

The noble remains of four magnificent abbeys punctuate the landscape of the Borders: four great monastic foundations which survive today only as monastic monuments, piercing reminders of the transience of greatness and power. They were all founded by one King of Scots – King David I – and all brought to ruin by the punitive onslaught on the Borders, known as the 'Rough Wooing', ordered by King Henry VIII of England in the 1540s (see Chapter 19).

Kelso Abbey is now just a stump – but what an elegant stump it is. Only the west end of the abbey church survives, with its Galilee porch islanded by traffic in the middle of the town. It was founded by King David in 1128 for the Tironensian order of monks (reformed Benedictines) from Tiron, near Chartres, who had originally been settled in Selkirk but who wanted to be closer to the formidable royal castle of Roxburgh on the other side of the Tweed. Kelso became one of the country's wealthiest religious houses, as well as being one of

the most spectacular achievements of Romanesque architecture in Scotland. It was where the young King James III was crowned King of Scots in 1460, following the untimely death of his father, James II, at the siege of Roxburgh when a cannon burst during a ceremonial firing (see Chapter 15).

Melrose Abbey, the largest and, some would say, the finest of the four, was founded under the patronage of King David by Cistercian monks from Yorkshire in 1136. Even in ruin it is strikingly handsome, and it is still of great importance to the local economy of Melrose – it is one of the most popular visitor attractions in Scotland.

Jedburgh was founded as a priory under the patronage of King David in 1138 and raised to the status of abbey in 1154. It is a graceful and almost entire ruin of an Augustinian abbey, sitting high and proud on a ridge above its associated monastic and domestic buildings. In the course of its history it suffered the usual ransackings due to its strategic position at one of the main gateways to Scotland. It was rebuilt on several occasions, but finally succumbed to the English hammer during the 'Rough Wooing' and was later suppressed by the Scottish Reformers in 1559. It is now served by a splendid new Visitor Centre which explains and illuminates its story with exemplary clarity.

Finally there is Dryburgh Abbey, perhaps the most hauntingly exquisite of the four. It stands in a beautiful sylvan setting on a horseshoe bend of the River Tweed, with fine parklands sweeping down to the river. It was established in 1150, towards the end of King David's reign. Because of its nearness to the border it, too, was severely damaged on several occasions, and never recovered from the final indignities of the 'Rough Wooing'. It was in one of the chapels of the ruined north transept that Sir Walter Scott was buried in September 1832 (see Chapter 29).

With these four great foundations, and many others besides, so resonant with the echoes of the nation's history, King David I created the fabric of the great period of medieval civilisation which Scotland was to enjoy in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

### *David the king*

David was the most 'English' of the three Canmore brother kings, and perhaps the luckiest. He was an attractive person in every sense, well-favoured physically and good-natured; he had spent much of his youth in England, where he was groomed as a Norman knight and 'polished from his boyhood by his intercourse and friendship with



us', as an English chronicler put it. His sister's marriage to Henry I of England in 1100 added to his social standing as a prince who, from 1107, was viceroy of the southern half of Scotland. In 1114 he married a wealthy forty-year-old widow, Maud de Senlis, Countess of Northampton and a ward of the king; she was also the daughter and heiress of Waltheof, the Earl of Huntingdon. This brought David the earldom of Northampton and the earldom ('Honour') of Huntingdon, with manors in eleven counties across the Midlands of England, making him one of the greatest barons in the country. Such was the premier nobleman of Norman England who turned into one of the greatest kings of medieval Scotland.

When David succeeded his brother on the throne in 1124 he brought with him to Scotland many of his friends from England who were to help him reshape the organisation and administration of Scotland, both civil and ecclesiastical, and become its new feudal aristocracy. We now meet for the first time the families who were to mould Scotland's future, powerful names like the Bruces, the Balliols and the Stewarts (David's first 'Steward' in Scotland was Walter Fitzalan, originally from Brittany, whose father had acquired lands in Norfolk and Shropshire). To these families David gave huge grants of land to establish their authority: to the Bruces he gave the vast lands of Annandale around the river Annan, which runs from the southern uplands to the Solway Firth; the hereditary 'Stewards' were given land which corresponds to modern Renfrewshire.

David's ecclesiastical foundations were the most spectacular of his reforms. In addition to the four great Border abbeys, he converted the wooden church of Drumselch Forest outside Edinburgh into the Abbey of Holyrood; he promoted the Benedictine priory of Dunfermline to the rank of an abbey, in honour of his mother Queen Margaret; he founded Newbattle on the Esk and St Mary of Cambuskenneth on the Forth. To all the churches and monasteries he founded he gave extensive estates and extravagant benefactions. So generous was he with the royal lands and revenues that he was later to be called 'a sair sanct [sore saint] for the crown' – that is to say, his pious activities cost the crown dear.

But there was prudence as well as religious devotion involved. Abbeys were good for the national economy. The Cistercians were the international wool merchants of their time, for instance; and David's monks engaged in all kinds of business enterprises, in farming, fishing, forestry, coal-working and salt-mining. The fledgling village of Kelso consisted almost entirely of people employed by the monks.

On top of this, David was assiduous in promoting commerce through the granting of royal charters to burghs from which he could collect regular revenues, and many of the towns and cities in today's Scotland date their origin or their first charters to David's reign. The first royal burghs, at Berwick-upon-Tweed and Roxburgh, were fortified with castles: Berwick Castle, standing high above the left bank of the Tweed, was to play a critically important role in Scottish history for centuries; Roxburgh Castle, sited between the Tweed and the Teviot, was to become the strongest bastion anywhere in the border lands. These developments may be seen as the beginning of a fortified 'border'.

All these important innovations were designed to give cohesion and stability to the realm, held together by a feudal system looser than its English model. Norman castles provided royal and baronial authority and security for the king's officers and tax-gatherers. His personal chaplains – well-educated priests all – formed the basis of an administrative bureaucracy, headed by a chancellor (for legal advice) and a chamberlain (for financial control). King David brought Scotland, as a kingdom, into the medieval European mainstream.

Steve Boardman, lecturer in Scottish History at Edinburgh University, says:

> *David is regarded as a pivotal figure in the development of Scotland and the Scottish kingship, because it was during his reign that so many novel and important features begin to develop and all the attributes of a medieval kingdom appear in Scotland. He was a very international figure in terms of Scottish kingship, part of the great cosmopolitan world which embraced Norman Europe. He had first-hand experience of Norman military techniques and tactics. He was part of the fashionable scene in terms of wider developments in Europe. Through David the Scottish kingdom began to develop along the same path as other European kingdoms, along similar lines to the accepted norms in France and England; so, in that sense, his kingship was crucial and has to be seen as extremely important.*

Ted Cowan urges caution in an uncritical use of the term 'feudalism' as it applies to David's Scotland:

> *I think David masterminded, quite brilliantly, a combination of what he wanted from the Norman world and what he perceived as being desirable in the old Celtic world.*





> *But this question of 'feudalism' is a highly problematical area. Many historians are no longer sure that there was any such thing as feudalism. If it is to be understood at all, it is best thought of simply as a system of landholding, whereby all land is held of the king; the king is the absolute proprietor of all land in the country. This is interesting, because in Celtic law all land was held communally by the clan. There were no absolute proprietors in the Celtic world. So there was a potential conflict there, but it is largely in the way in which landholding is described: the two systems could be accommodated quite well. And David was intelligent enough, and opportunistic enough, to achieve it.*

It all suggests a sunshine reign of success and untroubled prosperity. There were rebellions in the Celtic north-east in 1130 and again in 1134, but with southern help David was able to suppress them both and put his own men in place there. At home (which by now, for a King of Scots, meant Edinburgh) David's wife Maud (who died in 1130) provided him with three children. The only one to reach adulthood, however, was Henry (c.1114–52), the heir apparent, who became Earl of Northumberland and Northampton. He was a dashing young man of whom David was manifestly very proud. But not everything was to go David's way.

## *The Battle of the Standard (Northallerton, 1138)*

At the side of the A167 between Northallerton and Darlington, in North Yorkshire, stands a plain stone obelisk, its plinth marked with the simple legend: 'Battle of the Standard: AD 1138'. It also bears a metal shield with a stylised picture of a four-wheeled cart with a ship's mast festooned with banners. The monument marks the site of the most spectacular military event in David's long reign – the crushing defeat of a marauding Scottish army on a stretch of rolling moorland some three miles north of Northallerton on 22 August 1138.

The moorland has long been cultivated for agriculture, but the battle-site is easy to make out. Behind and in line with the monument is a rise in the ground on which sit the buildings of a farm called Standard Hill Farm; this was where the English army took up position around the curious 'standard' which gave the battle its popular name. To the left (i.e. the north) the ground dips and rises again towards another farm (also called Standard Hill Farm), which was where the Scottish force was deployed.

What was the battle about? England at that time was in the grip of a civil war following the death of Henry I in 1135. Henry's daughter Matilda, who was David I's niece, had the most obvious claim to the vacant throne and had been nominated by the late king as his heir. But another claimant stepped in – the king's nephew, Stephen of Blois, a grandson of William the Conqueror and husband of another of David I's nieces. Stephen had sworn fealty to Matilda (as had David I as a baron in England), but no sooner was Henry I dead than Stephen seized the throne for himself. It was to lead to nineteen years of bitter conflict within England; but its chief significance for Scotland was that it gave David I an opportunity to try to push Scotland's boundaries southwards. Claiming that he was supporting Matilda, he moved south in force and seized the English fortresses of Newcastle and Carlisle.

This was his great chance, it seemed, to recover the 'lost provinces'. From all corners of his kingdom he mustered a huge army (twenty-five thousand strong, according to English chroniclers, but this is now considered a substantial over-estimate) and set off in July 1138 towards York, harrying and pillaging on the way. Stephen had his hands full with a baronial uprising near Bristol, and the defence of the north fell to Thurstan, the ageing but militant Archbishop of York. Thurstan called for a 'holy crusade' to repel the Scottish invaders; from every pulpit in the county the call went out for able-bodied volunteers.

The English army – much smaller than the Scottish force – mustered at York and marched north to Thirsk; on Sunday, 21 August King David crossed the River Tees from Durham into Yorkshire. The English army thereupon marched north to stop his advance, and drew up in battle order early next morning just north of Northallerton. They were a motley collection of knights, peasants and priests, led by prelates; and because the resistance was Church-inspired, the English monastic chroniclers of the time took particular interest in what happened. Prior Richard of Hexham, writing in 1154, mirrored the propaganda war which preceded the encounter:

> *The king [David] then passing by Durham . . . and according to his usual practice, caused the towns and churches which had previously escaped uninjured to be dismantled, plundered and burnt. Crossing the Tees, he commenced a similar career of violence. But God's mercy, being moved by the tears of innumerable widows, orphans, and victims, no longer permitted such wickedness to remain unchastised.*





The rallying-point of the English army was a cart on which had been erected a ship's mast topped by a cross. From the pole hung a silver pyx containing the consecrated host, with the sacred banners of St Peter of York, St Cuthbert of Durham, St John of Beverley and St Wilfred of Ripon.

The Scots army presented a formidable array. In the centre were the lightly-armoured Pictish Galwegians from Galloway (known as Gallgaels), spoiling for a fight; on the left flank David's eldest son Henry led a force of mounted knights and well-equipped men-at-arms from the Borders and Cumbria; the Highland brigades were on the right flank, and King David himself commanded a reserve comprising the men of Moray and the eastern shires in the rear.

The battle was fought with tremendous heroism, and at terrible cost. The Gallgaels, dashing forward in a furious charge with their war-cry of 'Albanaich!', fell in droves under a storm of English arrows, but charged again and again at the English van. As the impetus of the reckless Gallgael attack faltered, Prince Henry charged the English centre with his mounted knights, but found himself isolated and extricated himself only with great difficulty. The Scottish attack stalled, and King David was pragmatic enough to realise that there could be no victory that day. Covered by the mounted reserve, the Scottish troops withdrew from the field. An old tree-lined lane just to the south of the English position, known as 'Scotpit Lane' (now disused and barred), is named after the burial pits into which some of the Scottish dead were thrown.

Surprisingly, after such a defeat in the field, David was able to salvage a great deal from this reverse. Neither Stephen nor the Empress Matilda was in any position to follow up the English victory. By the Treaty of Durham, which was signed in 1139, Stephen granted Northumberland to David's son, Earl Henry of Huntingdon, and to David I he granted Cumberland (with Carlisle) as far as the Ribble. It opened up the possibility, at least, that the Scottish frontier would run on the line of the Tees rather than the Tweed – which was precisely what David had hoped to achieve. Ten years later, in 1149, Matilda's son Henry of Anjou (subsequently Henry II of England) swore that should he become king, he would give David all the land between the Tweed and the Tees, and Cumberland on the west. But by the time Henry of Anjou became Henry II in 1154 he had little compunction about ignoring this promise to make the northern counties of England a part of Scotland for ever.

The Battle of the Standard left another and more enduring legacy.

The invasion brought out all the deep-rooted English prejudices against the Picts and the Scots as murderous barbarians, which Walter Scott reflected so faithfully in his *Tales of a Grandfather*. An English chronicler, Henry of Huntingdon, wrote of David's troops:

> *They cleft open pregnant women, and took out the unborn babe; they tossed children upon the spear-points, and beheaded priests upon the altars ... There was the screaming of women, the wailing of old men; groans of the dying, despair of the living.*
>
> HISTORIA ANGLORUM

What seems to have shocked the English was the fact that one of 'their own', a flower of Norman chivalry like David, should have unleashed such a savage horde to ravage a civilised kingdom. According to the English version, one of David's own Norman-English knights, Robert de Brus (the ancestor of the future King Robert Bruce), whom he had made Lord of Annandale, was so appalled by the Scots' brutality that he went over to the English camp; another of his new Norman friends, Bernard de Bailleul (the ancestor of the future King John Balliol), also deserted him.

Richard of Hexham described David's 'wicked army' as being 'composed of Normans, Germans, English, of Northumbrians and Cumbrians, of men of Teviotdale and Lothian, of Picts (who are commonly called Galwegians) and of Scots'. For Ted Cowan, this list of participants from Scotland tells us a lot about David's kingship:

> *Whether that list is strictly accurate or not, it was a code for saying 'David controlled the whole of his kingdom'. He was the* ruler – *the first person who ruled all of Scotland; and all its representatives showed up to fight for him against the English in 1138. That is a remarkable testimony to the ability, and probably the ingenuity, of this man.*

David escaped from the potential disaster of the Battle of the Standard with his territorial ambitions unscathed, even enhanced. But what sort of 'Scotland' did he create? To what extent could Scotland be called 'a nation', in the modern sense, in King David's reign? Steve Boardman says:

> *'Nation' is not the right word to use when we look back on the medieval kingdom. Scotland in the eleventh and twelfth centuries*





> *was a collection of regional lordships, presided over by a man who called himself King of Scots. David issued charters during his reign to his subjects – Scots, French, English – reflecting the different racial, ethnic and linguistic groups which made up the kingdom. The idea of nationhood would have been alien to people in twelfth-century Scotland, because they still belonged to different lordships, they still belonged to different ethnic and linguistic groups. What held Scotland, and indeed all medieval kingdoms, together was allegiance to the king and submission to the king's laws, the king's political authority; so to be a 'Scot' would not have meant what we mean by it today; it would have meant being someone who acknowledged the authority of the King of Scots – and that is not the same thing as identifying yourself ethnically and linguistically as part of a bigger group who are called Scots.*

Later Scottish sources were fulsome in praise of David. John of Fordun wrote of him in the *Chronica Gentis Scotorum* in floridly metaphorical terms:

> *He enriched the parts of his kingdom with foreign merchandise, and to the wealth of his own land added the riches and luxuries of foreign nations, changing its coarse stuffs for precious vestments, and covering its ancient nakedness with purple and fine linen.*

King David I reigned for twenty-nine years. He was nearly seventy years old, but had lost none of his vigour, when he died – significantly, in 'his' Carlisle Castle – in May 1153. His only son, Henry, Earl of Huntingdon, had died the previous year, leaving three sons and three daughters from his marriage to Ada, the Anglo-Norman daughter of the Norman Earl of Warenne. These three granddaughters of David I were to play an important role in the dynastic crisis which followed the death of Alexander III in 1286 (see Chapter 9).

In the last year of his life, after his son Henry's death, David designated the eldest of his grandsons, Malcolm, as his successor. In 1153, at the age of twelve, Malcolm was inaugurated on the Stone of Scone as Malcolm IV (r.1153–65). He never married, and was known as Malcolm 'the Maiden'. Sure enough, as David had feared, having a minor on the throne triggered unrest, and there were uprisings against Malcolm in the 'unreconstructed' Celtic west and north. In 1157 Mal-

colm was summoned to meet the new King of Engand, Henry II, at Chester. Henry forswore the undertaking he had given David in 1149 about Scotland's future frontier; by the Treaty of Chester the young King of Scots gave up Carlisle, together with the rest of Cumberland, Westmorland and Northumberland. He was compensated, however, with the gift of the earldom of Huntingdon. This made him a vassal of the King of England, for that possession at least. Henry II was not slow to press home his advantage; in 1158 he took Malcolm to France as his liegeman to campaign under his standard.

Malcolm was a frail, intensely pious young man who never enjoyed good health. Nonetheless, he showed unfailing courage and determination in dealing with the various uprisings and rebellions which broke out during his reign. He died at Jedburgh in December 1165 at the age of twenty-four, and was succeeded by his twenty-two-year-old brother William, a much more aggressive character: William I (r.1165–1214), later to be known as William 'the Lion'.



# Chapter 7

## WILLIAM THE LION (r.1165–1214)

*William King of Scotland, having chosen for his armorial bearing a Red Lion, rampant . . . he acquired the name of William the Lion . . . William, though a brave man, and though he had a lion for his emblem, was unfortunate in war.*

*TALES OF A GRANDFATHER*, CHAPTER IV

The majestic ruins of Arbroath Abbey, on the Angus coast about thirty kilometres east of Dundee, retain memories of many significant events in the story of Scotland's nationhood struggle: it was here that the Declaration of Arbroath was prepared and signed in 1320 (see Chapter 11), and it was on the foundations of the High Altar that the Stone of Destiny was laid in 1950 after it had been spirited away from Westminster Abbey by four young Scottish Nationalists (see pages 673–80).

On the turf a few metres in front of the High Altar, sheltered now only by the gaunt remains of the east gable wall, an incised slab of red sandstone commemorates the burial, somewhere in that area, of the royal founder of the abbey in 1178: King William I, 'the Lion'.

William the Lion is one of the least known and most disregarded of Scotland's kings. Despite the fact that his was the longest reign by a medieval Scottish monarch (forty-nine years, from 1165 to 1214), he is strangely unknown to the general public compared with his grandfather David I or his successors (his son Alexander II and grand-

son Alexander III). Indeed, some historians have been scornfully dismissive of him:

> *Of this king little can be told that is creditable to himself, of advantage to Scotland or, indeed, of interest to the reader. He reigned for almost half a century but achieved practically nothing.*
>
> P. AND F.S. FRY, *THE HISTORY OF SCOTLAND* (1980)

But was William really as toothless a lion as that? Geoffrey Barrow, Professor Emeritus at Edinburgh University and an eminent scholar of late medieval Scotland, has stressed that William successfully extended royal authority over the remoter Celtic and Scandinavian areas of the kingdom (the far north and west), and greatly improved the feudal administration of Scotland. His major failure, however – a failure which cost Scotland very dear – was his attempt to recover, as his personal fiefdom, the northern provinces of England: David I had assigned to William's father, Prince Henry, the earldom of Northumberland, but William's predecessor on the throne, his elder brother Malcolm IV, had surrendered it to the King of England.

And therein lies the paradox at the heart of William's reign. Totally committed as he was to consolidating Scotland's independence, he was nonetheless forced to pledge the nation's vassalage to England as a result of his disastrous obsession with the lost province of Northumbria.

Yet when he ascended the throne in 1165 at the age of twenty-two, William must have looked every inch the part of a native Scottish king. He was red-haired and powerfully built, a man of lusty energies and appetites (he fathered six illegitimate children before his marriage in 1186 at the age of forty-three), a reckless young knight who lacked both the political guile of his grandfather David I and the artistic sensibilities of his brother Malcolm IV, a blustering, headstrong fellow, the sort of captain of men who could today win a rugby international at Murrayfield single-handed and just as easily throw away the Calcutta Cup at Twickenham.

The most useful way of assessing his long reign is to divide it into four distinct periods.

The first nine years, from 1165 to 1174, was a time when the new king enjoyed comparative peace. But he quickly signalled his obsession with the earldom of Northumberland by badgering Henry II of England about it at every opportunity – so much so, as reported in a private letter reproduced in Sir Archibald Lawrie's *Annals of the Reigns of Malcolm and William, Kings of Scotland* (1910), that





> *the mere mention of William's name caused Henry to fly into a violent rage, tearing at his clothes, ripping the covers on his couch and even gnawing at handfuls of straw snatched up from the floor.*

The second period, the fifteen years from 1174 to Henry II's death in 1189, marked the most humiliating period of William's reign – the long and bitter subjection to English overlordship. Disregarding the counsel of his senior advisers, William thought he could take advantage of a rebellion fomented by Henry's sons against their father and recover the northern counties while Henry's attention was distracted. He sent his younger brother, David, the Earl of Huntingdon, south to the English barons as an earnest of his good faith, while he himself mounted an invasion of Northumbria which became (in English minds, at least) a byword for merciless ferocity. But his attempt to bludgeon Henry into agreement failed disastrously. David was quickly made a prisoner; worse still, William himself was captured at Alnwick in July 1174.

There is an air of tragi-comedy about that capture. William's army had failed to capture Newcastle and was now besieging Alnwick. One day William was out riding with a small group of men-at-arms when he detected, through the early-morning mist, a band of cavalry approaching. William thought they were a detachment of his own army; when he realised they were English knights, he charged at them, lance at the ready, shouting, 'Now we shall see which of us are good knights!' Hopelessly outnumbered, he was unhorsed and taken prisoner. His captors retreated swiftly with their royal prisoner and he was taken to King Henry at Northampton with his legs tied under his horse's belly like a common felon. Henry incarcerated him in a dungeon in the castle of Falaise, in Normandy, and kept him prisoner there for five months. Eventually, through the Treaty of Falaise (December 1174), William was forced to pay Henry explicit homage not just for himself but also 'for the kingdom of Scotland and his other lands in England', directly subject to the overlordship of the king of England and his heirs. The implication was clear: Scotland was only held by the King of Scots as a fief from the King of England as his overlord. English garrisons were installed in the castles at Berwick-upon-Tweed, Edinburgh, Jedburgh, Roxburgh and Stirling (all at Scotland's expense), the Scottish bishops were required to make submission to Canterbury (which they resisted successfully), and the sons of important Scottish nobles were taken as hostages.

For fifteen years the Treaty of Falaise remained in full force, and until the day he died Henry II extracted every drop of homage and humiliation he could from William, demanding the scrupulous fulfilment of every letter of the treaty. Perhaps the most humiliating sign of William's subjection to Henry was his marriage in 1186. Not only did Henry choose William's wife for him (Ermengarde, the daughter of a minor Norman vassal, Richard de Beaumont), he gave the new Scottish queen a cheap (for him) and cynical wedding-gift – Edinburgh Castle.

The English stranglehold on Scotland was loosened only when Henry II, brought to bay in France by another rebellion stirred up by his sons, died in the summer of 1189. His death ushered in the third major period of the reign of William of Scotland, from 1189 to 1209 – a twenty-year period of independence and peace with England and comparative prosperity. The new King of England, Henry's eldest surviving son Richard I (Richard Lion-Heart), had already taken a vow to go on the Third Crusade to drive the Saracens out of Palestine, and was desperate for money to finance the expedition. The castles north of the border still in English hands were returned to Scottish ownership, and William and the Scottish nation willingly paid ten thousand Scottish *merks* for the abrogation of all the terms of the Treaty of Falaise, in what is known as the 'Quitclaim of Canterbury' (1189): 'Thus, God willing, he worthily and honourably removed the heavy yoke of domination and servitude from the kingdom of the Scots' (*Chronicle of Melrose*).

No sooner did William get back the unfettered feu of his kingdom, however, than he was riding his relentless hobby-horse to Northumbria again. In 1194, after personally subscribing two thousand *merks* towards Richard's own ransom after his capture by the German Emperor in 1192, William offered fifteen thousand *merks* for Northumberland, more than he had paid for Scotland itself – but Richard would have none of it, if it meant acknowledging Northumberland to be part of Scotland.

But where it mattered – in Scotland – the decade of Richard's tenure of the English throne saw William reach the peak of his predominance at home, building up his military power to deal with domestic insurrection and knitting his kingdom together. From the accession to the English throne of Richard's treacherous younger brother, John 'Lackland', in 1199, it all began to go downhill. As usual, William lodged another claim for Northumbria and, as usual, it was turned down. John was much more skilfully ruthless than William, much better





versed in the subtleties of power-politics. Relations between them, which had been strained from the outset, reached breaking-point in 1209 over the building of a new English castle at Tweedmouth, facing the vital sea-port of Berwick, which was then part of Scotland.

This trouble ushered in the fourth and final period of William's reign, from 1209 to 1214. William was a relatively old man by now, in his mid-sixties, and his health was beginning to fail. He had lost the initiative in the power-play with England. In 1204, in an act of blatant provocation, King John had given orders for the Tweedmouth fort to be built where it could menace Berwick. The Scots had responded by levelling the half-built castle to the ground – twice. The two kings held peace talks in Norham Castle, but nothing came of them. In 1209 John returned to Norham with a huge army. William, in response, assembled a force at Roxburgh, and full-scale war threatened. This time, however, William drew back from the brink. By the Treaty of Norham John agreed that the castle would not be completed, but in return for this 'concession', and as compensation for damage inflicted, William had to pay fifteen thousand *merks* 'for having the goodwill of King John'. William also had to relinquish all claim to the northern counties, and to hand over his two elder daughters, Margaret and Isabel, to be married off by John, on the vague suggestion that they would eventually marry John's sons. Nothing came of that, and William would never see them again; in the event they were married off to high-ranking English noblemen many years after his death.

The Treaty of Norham was another grave setback for the Scottish monarchy. The last six years of William's reign became a sort of interregnum: the ageing king was steadily losing his vigour and drive, and the young heir to the throne, the future Alexander II, was barely out of childhood (he was born in 1198, twelve years after his parents' marriage), too young and inexperienced to take over the reins of leadership with any confidence. Little wonder, then, that King John was able to impose himself so aggressively on the Scottish kingdom and its subjects.

William had a year of illness and convalescence in 1213, but was sufficiently recovered by the following year to march north to Caithness to impose the king's peace there. In September he was back in Stirling, where he succumbed to his final illness. He died on 4 December 1214, at the age of seventy-one.

## *The legacy of the Lion*

To be saddled with the sobriquet of 'Lion' (or 'Lion-heart', for that matter) can be a handicap if one's actions are not perceived as being sufficiently leonine. William was never known as 'the Lion' in his lifetime – it was a nickname invented by later historians – and there is little agreement about how or why he acquired the name. In *Tales of a Grandfather*, Sir Walter Scott assumed that it was because of the emblematic lion rampant on his coat of arms. Others have thought it was because of his 'rough and stern countenance'. The most likely explanation, to my mind, lies with the earliest Scottish chronicler to imply the name, John of Fordun in the fourteenth century, who referred flatteringly to William as *leo justitiae*, a 'lion of justice'. Nonetheless, if he really was the first Scottish king to emblazon his standard with the lion rampant, William bequeathed to his nation a symbol of defiance with which generations of Scots have been happy to identify ever since.

Arbroath Abbey was the other major legacy of his reign, and thereby hangs an intriguing tale. William was not greatly renowned for piety or devotion to the Church, as his brother Malcolm IV had been (although towards the end of his life he seems to have achieved a reputation for personal sanctity). But in 1178, three years after his release from Henry's captivity after the disaster at Alnwick, he not only founded Arbroath Abbey but also endowed it so lavishly that it became one of the richest religious houses in all Scotland.

According to the original charter, William founded a monastery and church 'at the place near the mouth of the Brothock Burn in honour of God and of St Thomas à Becket, Archbishop and Martyr'. That should give us pause, for there is more to this than meets the eye. Why should this violently anti-English king choose to dedicate this magnificent Scottish foundation to Thomas à Becket, an Anglo-Norman prelate?

Thomas, in his time, was the most brilliant figure in the court of Henry II, a man of great personal charisma, apparently, an assiduous party-giver, a skilled diplomat and, moreover, well-versed in all the martial arts of chivalry. He became Henry's chancellor in 1155 (the year after Henry's accession), and in 1162 Henry appointed him Archbishop of Canterbury. Almost overnight the sybarite became an ascetic; his former loyalty to Henry was replaced by an unswerving zeal for the Church and its rights against the state. This led to exile, followed by an uneasy reconciliation; but as soon as Thomas returned to Canterbury the old antagonism flared up again, and Henry uttered his celebrated, impetuous wish to be rid of 'this turbulent priest'. It was as a direct result of these intemperate words that Thomas à Becket was murdered in Canterbury Cathedral on 29 December 1170 by four of Henry's hard-tempered Norman knights. The murder and its circumstances sent a thrill of horror throughout Europe, and stories soon spread of miracles worked at Thomas's tomb. In 1173 he was canonised and quickly became the most widely venerated of all English saints.





King Henry was nothing if not a pragmatist. Becket's martyrdom had swung the struggle between Church and crown in the Church's favour, and Henry had to swing it back again. After settling some differences in Normandy in the summer of 1174, Henry came back to England to do public penance for the death of Thomas à Becket. On 12 July he submitted himself to be scourged by each one of the eighty assembled clergymen in turn.

A week later, when Henry was back in London, he was brought the news that King William of Scotland had been captured at Alnwick on the previous Saturday – 13 July. Praise be to God! And, in particular, praise be to Thomas à Becket, who had in this way clearly rewarded Henry for his (albeit belated) repentance.

But why, four years later, should *William* wish to thank God and Thomas à Becket for his capture? One can understand his motives, in the middle of the most abjectly humiliating period of his reign, for building Arbroath Abbey in the first place, as a deliberate and defiant statement of his continuing importance and prestige. And perhaps – just perhaps – the dedication to St Thomas was intended as a monumental insult to the English royal house, by extolling the man who, both in life and in death, had humbled the crown of England, yet couched in such unassailable piety that none could publicly take offence, not even Henry of England himself. I tend to believe that it was the one truly subtle thing which this blunt and headstrong king ever did.

After his death at Stirling in 1214 the body of King William the Lion was taken to the abbey he had founded and was buried there 'in front of the high altar', according to John of Fordun. But *where* 'in front of the high altar'? For many years there was no monument nor plaque to commemorate his interment, because no one knew the precise spot where his body had been laid. And then, in 1816, a local antiquarian named Dr Stevenson who was poking around with spade and trowel in the ruins, four metres in front of the High Altar, chanced upon an old stone coffin containing some mouldering bones, its lid

surmounted by a headless recumbent effigy with its feet resting upon a crouching lion.

We should remember that this period was the heyday of earnest amateur antiquarianism. 1816 was also, by an agreeable coincidence, the year in which Sir Walter Scott published one of his most charming works, his own 'chief favourite among all his novels', as he himself put it: *The Antiquary*. The antiquary of the title, Jonathan Oldbuck, the learned and garrulous Laird of Monkbarns, is an affectionately mocking caricature of all those earnest snappers-up of unconsidered historical trifles – including Walter Scott himself:

> *He had his own pursuits, being in correspondence with most of the virtuosi of his time, who, like him, measured decayed entrenchments, made plans of ruined castles, read illegible inscriptions, and wrote essays on medals in proportion of twelve pages to each letter of the legend.*

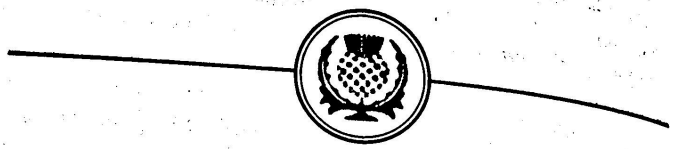
Dr Stevenson, the real-life Jonathan Oldbuck, leaped to the instant and uncritical conclusion that he had found a royal tomb – *the* royal tomb, indeed: the tomb of William the Lion. The find created a local sensation; it also created a small fortune for unscrupulous local entrepreneurs who were soon exhibiting and selling bits of bones from the coffin (assiduously replenished whenever stocks ran out). Dr Stevenson himself sent various items of ossified royalty to his fellow-virtuosi and antiquarians, including a tooth ('a royal grinder', as he called it) to a gentleman in Montrose: 'Very few relics are so well authenticated,' he wrote, 'even the most venerated of the Church of Rome.'

But it was all wishful thinking. After more than a century and a half of fierce argument the effigy on the sarcophagus lid was dated, on stylistic grounds, to be that of a wealthy commoner from no earlier than the middle of the fourteenth century – 150 years after King William's death. It was placed for safe keeping in the Abbot's House outside the skeleton walls of the abbey and put on proper display as part of an imaginative Visitor Information system in 1982 (the first to be put in place at a historic monument in the care of the state). Finally, in 1986, to give the vexed issue of William's place of interment a dignified conclusion, the Historic Buildings and Monuments Directorate of Scotland (now Historic Scotland) planted that sandstone memorial slab in the area in front of the High Altar. It marks not the alleged site of the burial, but only the event itself:

## WILLIAM THE LION (r.1165–1214)

*King William the Lion*
*King of Scots 1165–1214*
*Founded this monastery in 1178*
*In honour of St Thomas of Canterbury,*
*Archbishop and Martyr,*
*For monks of St Benedict from Kelso,*
*Of the family of Tiron.*
*King William died at Stirling, 4 December 1214,*
*And was buried in this Abbey Church.*

It is symptomatic, ironically, that the burial place of this much misprised King of Scotland should still be a matter of mystery and lingering doubt.



# Chapter 8

## THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY: ALEXANDERS II AND III

*William the Lion was succeeded by his son, Alexander II, a youth in years, but remarkable for prudence and for firmness. In his days there was some war with England, as he espoused the cause of the disaffected barons, against King John. But no disastrous consequences having arisen, the peace betwixt the two kingdoms was . . . effectually restored . . .*

*Relieved from the cares of an English war, Alexander endeavoured to civilize the savage manners of his own people. These were disorderly to a great degree.*

*TALES OF A GRANDFATHER*, CHAPTER V

The reigns of two Alexanders – Alexander II (r.1214–49), the son of William the Lion, and Alexander's son, Alexander III (r.1249–86) – spanned most of the thirteenth century. That century came to be wistfully remembered by John of Fordun in the 1380s as a golden age of princely stability and prosperity – especially as it was a prelude to tragedy and to the desperate times of the Wars of Independence. But how much of a Golden Age was it? Professor Ted Cowan has his reservations:

*This 'Golden Age' was only golden because of what came after. It so happens that the second half of the thirteenth century was a period of prosperity everywhere in Europe. It seems to have just been one of those boom periods, for whatever reason, and Scotland shared in this. This was a period, after all, which is associated with the development of some of our greatest religious architecture, of abbeys and Romanesque churches, and of castle-building. The development of the royal burghs established by David I went on apace. Church organisation was strengthened and a proper parish system was established. So to that extent it was a period of development, prosperity and consolidation. It was also a time of relative peace – and 'peace' is always equated with 'golden age'.*





That is not to say that the thirteenth century was uneventful. The 'peace', as Ted Cowan points out, was relative. As soon as Alexander II ascended the throne at the age of sixteen his fledgling authority was challenged by a Celtic uprising in the north, but this was quickly quelled by a loyal lieutenant there. In England the old enemy, King John, was in deep trouble with his barons and was constrained to sign away some of his more arbitrary powers in the Magna Carta at Runnymede on 15 June 1215. Alexander II seized what he saw as a fine opportunity to regain the lost territories in the north of England which had so obsessed his father. It was a misjudgement: King John turned on Scotland with a snarl, 'to chase the red fox-cub back to his lair', as a chronicler put it, and vicious warfare flared on both sides of the border. But now the forces ranged against John were threatening to overwhelm him, and he was fighting for his life: his barons were at war with him and had brought over a French claimant to the throne – Louis, son and heir of King Philippe II of France. In October 1216 the English king was struck down by a mysterious illness which caused his death – from poison, according to some.

The death of King John changed everything. His son Henry, only nine years old, was quickly enthroned at Gloucester as Henry III under the regency of the stalwart old William Marshal, Earl of Pembroke. In England, baronial support for Louis of France melted away and he sailed back home; and in Scotland, Alexander II laid aside his military ambitions in the north of England. Indeed, in 1221 he married Henry III's elder sister, Joan, which did much to stabilise relations between the two countries. This left Alexander free to assert and consolidate royal authority in the ever-recalcitrant north and west of the mainland of Scotland.

In the 1230s Alexander came to realise that he was never going to recover Northumberland as a family possession, and in the autumn

of 1237 he signed an amicable agreement (the Treaty of York) whereby he renounced all claims to territory south of the Tweed and the Solway. In recompense he was given tenure (under the overlordship of the English king) of certain lands in Northumberland and Cumberland – though not their castles. The Treaty of York, curiously enough, finds no mention in Scott's *Tales of a Grandfather*, but it was of extreme historical importance in that it established the Anglo–Scottish frontier along a line from the Tweed to the Solway – a line which was to remain unchanged from then on, with the conspicuous exception of Berwick-upon-Tweed. It was an implicit acceptance by England, for the time being at least, of Scotland's right to exist as a free and independent kingdom.

And what of the common people of this independent nation of Scotland, as it could now be called – the people whose manners Walter Scott called 'savage' and 'disorderly' and much in need of civilising? The population of Scotland at this time was only about 300,000. Most of them were poor peasants living in small stone-and-turf houses which they usually shared with any livestock they might have had: subsistence farming – mainly pastoral in the north and west, more arable south of the Forth – with the tenants paying rent to the laird in kind and in labour; but at least the weather conditions were markedly better than they had been in previous centuries. Only a small proportion of the population – perhaps 10 per cent – lived in the trading towns established by David I and continued by the Alexanders as new links were forged with overseas markets; Europeans with commercial and manufacturing skills were encouraged to come and settle in these burghs, of which there were nearly fifty by the end of the thirteenth century.

The Treaty of York gave Alexander II greater freedom of manoeuvre, now that he no longer had to devote so many of his energies to coping with his much larger and more powerful neighbour. In 1238 his wife Joan died childless, and Alexander immediately applied himself to one of the most urgent functions of medieval kingship – producing a male heir to the throne. He turned not to England but to the nobility of France, and in the following year he married Marie de Coucy, a kinswoman of the French king. In September 1241 she duly bore him a son, who was named after his father – the future Alexander III.

There was to be another spat with England, in 1244, when Scottish and English armies eyed one another menacingly across the border. There seems to have been an element of brinkmanship involved, and in the event no battle ensued; but as part of the peace negotiations





the infant Alexander was betrothed to Henry III's daughter Margaret, herself only a year older than her future bridegroom. It seemed to adumbrate a future when the two kingdoms would be much more closely allied – perhaps even a Union of the Crowns many centuries before that actually came about in 1603.

Alexander II had consolidated the crown's control over mainland Scotland and welded it into a more cohesive realm than it had ever been. Now the time was ripe to extend this centralised royal authority over the islands to the west – the Hebrides. For long (too long, in thirteenth-century Scottish eyes) they, and the Northern Isles, had been subject to the crown of Norway (see Chapter 3)

Norwegian royal authority in the Western Isles had been waning steadily as the Gaelic-speaking leaders of the warrior Somerled dynasty vied for the title of 'Lord of the Isles'. In Norway, however, there was now a king of great drive and imperial ambition – King Håkon IV (r.1217–64), who has come down in history with the sobriquet Håkon 'the Old'.

Historians seeking to gain a clear picture of relations between Scotland and Norway at this period now look to overseas sources – particularly the medieval Icelandic sagas such as *Orkneyinga Saga* and *Hákonar Saga*, the biography of Håkon the Old written soon after his death by the Icelandic saga-historian Sturla Thórðarson; there are no contemporary Scottish sources for the events, and later Scottish historians were to invent and embellish to fill the gaps.

In 1230, Håkon the Old decided to re-establish effective Norwegian suzerainty over the Hebridean warlords, who owed him revenues and allegiance. He sent a punitive expedition in 1230 which caused considerable havoc. One furious engagement is described in graphic detail in his saga – a three-day assault on Rothesay Castle on the island of Bute, in the Firth of Clyde. The Norsemen finally got in by hacking through the castle's thick circular stone walls with their axes despite cascades of boiling lead and pitch raining down upon them from the battlements. Rothesay Castle, with its unique (for Scotland) circular walls, is now in state care and has been vividly restored by Historic Scotland; romantics like me can persuade themselves that they can still see the marks of the implacable Norse axes which forced an entry.

The Norsemen did not stay long to enjoy their exploit, but the expedition as a whole was considered to have been a success: those whose allegiance to Norway had been suspect were killed or driven out, and new men were put in their place; the Western Isles had been 'pacified' to Håkon's satisfaction.

It was only natural that Alexander II should want to exercise dominion over the Western Isles himself, if only to curb the piratical Islesmen whose galleys menaced the seaways off the western Highlands. Accordingly, he sent embassies to Norway from 1244 onwards to try to negotiate a deal over the islands. The Scottish envoys even indicated that Alexander would be prepared to buy the Western Isles for good silver, to which King Håkon gave a haughty answer: 'He said he was not aware that he was so short of silver that he needed to sell his lands for it.'

The repeated diplomatic snubs from Norway only increased Alexander's determination to deal with this thorn in his western side, by force if necessary, especially after Håkon appointed Ewen, Lord of Argyll and head of the powerful Macdougall clan, as his vassal king over the islands. In the spring of 1249 Alexander mobilised a massive expedition by land and sea to crush this threat to 'the soft underbelly of Scotland', as the novelist Eric Linklater called it.

Alexander's first target was to be Dunstaffnage Castle at the entrance to Loch Etive on the western seaboard; it was the chief stronghold of the Macdougalls and had only recently been built by Ewen of Argyll (or his father). What a fortress it was, and is! It stands proud on a rocky knoll on a promontory some four miles north of Oban. Its massive stone curtain walls, still intact after nearly eight centuries, must have seemed almost impregnable; its lofty battlements command a tremendous view west across the seaway towards the island of Lismore and east into the narrows of Loch Etive towards the looming bulk of Ben Cruachan.

Alexander gathered his great fleet in the Sound of Kerrera, the three-kilometre-long fertile island which shelters the Oban coastline. But as his galleys lay at anchor in Horseshoe Bay, poised to launch the assault on Dunstaffnage, Alexander had an ominous dream, according to *Hákonar Saga*:

> *When King Alexander was lying at anchor in Kerrera Sound he had a dream. In his dream he thought that three men came to him. One of them seemed to him to be dressed in royal robes. He looked very menacing, ruddy of face and rather stout, of medium height. The second man seemed slender in build and gallant-looking, very handsome and of noble bearing. The third man was much the biggest in build and the most menacing of them all. His forehead was quite bald. He spoke to the king and asked him if he were heading for the Hebrides. The king replied*





> *that this was so: he was on his way to subjugate the islands. The man in his dream asked him to turn back, saying that nothing else would do.*
>
> *The king recounted his dream, and most of his companions urged him to turn back, but the king refused. Soon afterwards the king fell ill and died. The Scots then dispersed their army and transported the king back to Scotland. The Hebrideans say that the men who appeared to the king in his dream would have been Saint Ólaf, King of Norway, and Saint Magnús, Earl of Orkney, and Saint Columba.*

Whether one believes in dreams or not, Alexander II did indeed fall ill in Kerrera Sound. He died there, either on his ship or on land, on 8 July 1249; no cairn commemorates the spot, but a grassy field beside the shore is known to this day as 'Dalrigh' – Gaelic for 'the field of the king'. He was buried in Melrose Abbey, in accordance with his last wishes; his unmarked tomb is in a recess in the wall of the presbytery to the south of the High Altar, but there is no plaque to identify it for visitors, as yet.

With Alexander's death, his army melted away and the great fleet dispersed; but the crown's ambition to annex the Hebrides was only put on hold, not abandoned.

## *The inauguration of Alexander III*

> *ALEXANDER III, then only in his eighth year, succeeded to his father in 1249. Yet, when only two years older, he went to York to meet with the English King, and to marry his daughter, the Princess Margaret.*
>
> TALES OF A GRANDFATHER, CHAPTER V

Scone Palace, hard by the city of Perth in the geographical heartland of Scotland, is one of the stateliest of the country's private homes, the seat of the Earl and Countess of Mansfield. The first house, built at the end of the sixteenth century, was almost totally rebuilt in pseudo-Gothic style in 1802–12 by the third Earl of Mansfield; this huge mansion is a treasury of beautiful *objets d'art* and paintings and furnishings of rare historic interest.

It was here at Scone, seated on the Stone of Scone in what had been the power-base of the old Pictish kingdom of Fortriu (see Chapter 3), that the seven-year-old Alexander III was inaugurated as King of

Scots on 13 July 1249, a week after the death of his father. The boy-king was accompanied to Scone by seven earls and many other leading magnates and churchmen of Scotland. The scene was described, a century later, in John of Fordun's *Chronica Gentis Scottorum*:

> *[They] led Alexander, soon to be the king, to the cross which stands in the churchyard at the east end of the church of Scone. There they set him on the royal throne, which was decked with silken cloths inwoven with gold; and the Bishop of St Andrews, assisted by the rest, consecrated him king, as was meet. So the king sat down upon the royal throne – that is, the Stone – while the earls and other nobles, on bended knee, spread their garments under his feet before the Stone.*
>
> *Now, this stone is reverently kept in that same monastery for the coronation of the kings of Alba; and no king was ever wont to reign in Scotland unless he had first, on receiving the name of king, sat upon this Stone at Scone, which by kings of old had been appointed the capital of Alba.*

It was a solemn and striking occasion. Afterwards a traditional Highland *sennachie* (bard) recited in Gaelic the new king's genealogy far back into the distant mythical past, to the eponymous Scota and Gaedel Glas: 'Hail, king of Alba, Alexander, mac Alexander, mac William, mac Henry, mac David . . .' It was a powerful public recognition of the strength of the living inheritance from the Celtic kingdoms of the past.

It is impossible to be certain where at Scone the ceremony took place. In the thirteenth century there was an abbey where the present palace now stands. The inauguration of Alexander III seems to have taken place in the open air, close to the abbey at a site traditionally known as Moot Hill (Hill of Meeting) directly opposite the palace; the Stone of Scone ('Stone of Destiny') would have been carried from the abbey and decked as a throne. Moot Hill, now half-screened by yew trees, was reduced in height in the nineteenth century. On it today stands a small family mausoleum, all that remains of the church which was built there in 1624 and in which Charles II was crowned in 1651. Outside the mausoleum is a replica of the Stone of Scone; it is as close to actual history as the visitor can get.

The accession of a minor might well have caused a political crisis (as it would do, time and time again, during the Stewart dynasty), but on this occasion Church and nobility closed ranks to protect the crown.





Alexander's kingship was perceived to be blessed by divine grace within two months by the canonisation of the matriarch of the dynasty, Queen Margaret, wife of Malcolm Canmore, in 1250. This was a notable coup which gave the royal line the lustre of a saintly ancestry and which was celebrated in June 1250 by the solemn translation of her remains to a new shrine near the great altar in Dunfermline Abbey.

In December 1251, at the age of ten, the boy-king was taken by his court to York to be knighted by Henry III before being married to Henry's daughter Margaret. It gave the English king an immediate opportunity to raise the dormant question of Scotland's subjection to England; according to the contemporary *St Albans Chronicle*, Alexander was then asked to do homage for the kingdom of Scotland. His advisers must have seen this coming, for the boy replied gravely that he had come to marry, not to answer so difficult a question. That answer helped to defuse, for a time at least, the perennial issue of overlordship.

The years of Alexander's minority in the 1250s had their political tremors as different noble factions and parties within the regency vied for control of the king's person (and therefore the government), with Henry III interfering busily in the background – ostensibly out of concern for his daughter's welfare. The young couple were not allowed to live together as man and wife and were kept under the strict control of tutors or guardians

When Alexander's minority ended in 1259, on his eighteenth birthday, the reins of government were firmly held by pro-king nobles – particularly the powerful Comyn family, who exercised power on behalf of the king in both the north and the south-west – and he was able to hit the ground running, as the saying goes. He showed strength of character and even-handedness in dealing with his quarrelsome nobles. Soon he was resuming his father's attempt to wrest the Hebrides from Norwegian control. In 1261 he sent an embassy to Norway to discuss the Scottish claim to the Hebrides, but King Håkon was in no mood for concessions. In the summer of 1262 news reached Norway of savage raids on the Isle of Skye from the mainland; furthermore, the messengers from Skye reported that the King of Scots had declared openly that he intended to take possession of the Hebrides by force or die in the attempt.

These reports 'caused King Håkon the gravest concern', as his saga puts it, and that Christmas he called on all the regions of his realm to muster the traditional defence levy in Bergen the following spring. He fitted out a royal flagship which had been specially built in Bergen

– a magnificent oaken vessel with snarling dragon-heads fore and aft, gleaming with gold inlay. It was an exceptionally large ship, with thirty-seven pairs of oars, and Håkon had designed it as a troop-carrier for the cream of his soldiers: one half-bench for each oar carried four men, making a total complement of 296, including a retinue of priests and civil servants. According to the contemporary *Icelandic Annals* Håkon's fleet contained 'the largest army which had ever sailed from Norway', and it is clear that Håkon was using his ships as transports laden to the gunwales with troops in case he decided to launch a full-scale invasion of the Scottish mainland and engage the Scottish army in pitched battle.

The fleet set sail from Bergen for Shetland early in July 1263, but things did not go smoothly in mustering more ships in the Northern Isles. Eventually, on 10 August, Håkon set sail westwards through the Pentland Firth and across the Minch to Lewis. He mustered again near South Rona, off Skye, where he was joined by reinforcements from the Isle of Man, and from there the great, glittering fleet passed through the narrow Kyle of Lochalsh at a point which was thereafter named after him: the Strait of Håkon, Kyle-Håkon – Kyleakin.

South they coasted, to Kerrera and Oban Bay, where they were joined by some loyal Islesmen. Here Håkon paused again, and sent off a squadron of fifty ships to plunder in Kintyre, while another fifteen rounded the Mull of Kintyre and attacked the Isle of Bute, where Rothesay Castle was taken again as it had been in 1230. Kintyre and Islay submitted at the first taste of pillage, and the plundering was called off in return for a tax of a thousand head of cattle. After that, with the islands to the west brought to heel, Håkon weighed anchor and sailed south down the coast of Kintyre and rounded the Mull into the Clyde estuary, where he anchored in Lamlash Bay, on Arran, in the lee of Holy Island. It was now September, and Håkon's strategy was clear: the stronghold on the Isle of Bute had been reduced, and he lay poised with a huge army to strike at the mainland at will.

Alexander, meanwhile, had apparently been mustering the Scots army somewhere in Ayrshire. He now sent an embassy of Dominican friars to Arran to make overtures of peace. Håkon responded by sending over a delegation of two bishops 'skilled in the Scots tongue'. When the talks began, Alexander seemed only too willing to come to terms. He said he would think things over and send his delegation back to renew the talks on Arran the next day. Håkon had made up a list of all the islands to the west which he claimed to own; Alexander jibbed over Arran, Bute and the Cumbraes – but that was merely a





technicality, he implied. Agreement was just around the corner; a settlement was almost within their grasp – but somehow it remained just beyond their grasp. The saga suggests that the Scots were deliberately spinning things out: 'The Scots had decided to prolong the negotiations, and make sure that a settlement was never quite achieved, as summer was passing and the weather would soon worsen.'

The drift of the Scottish tactics was not lost on King Håkon. In another threatening move he took his fleet much closer to the Scottish coast, to the lee of the Cumbraes just off Largs. More talks followed, but the outcome was always the same: there were still some minor differences to be settled, nothing serious – but meanwhile Alexander allowed the Norsemen a glimpse of his army assembling on the hills inland. Håkon was rapidly losing patience, and now he sent Alexander an ultimatum – that they should meet on land, each with his full army, and talk, and if the talks failed they would fight. Alexander responded that he was not averse to fighting, but gave no definite answer either way.

Håkon was now running out of time and provisions. Abruptly he called off the talks and sent a squadron of sixty ships up Loch Long to Arrochar, where they dragged their ships' boats across a porterage to Tarbet and Loch Lomond and burned and terrorised the islands in the loch and the surrounding Lennox countryside. On their way back, however, the saga relates that ten of their ships were wrecked in Loch Long in a gale.

The same gale was to play havoc with Håkon's main fleet sheltering under the Cumbraes. It struck on the night of Sunday, 30 September, howling in from the south-west. During the night a merchantman was blown against the king's ship; its stays fouled the dragon-head, snapping off the nostrils. As the tempest blew harder, ship after ship dragged its anchors; it took no fewer than eight anchors to hold the king's huge ship steady. By dawn the loose merchantman and three longships had been blown across the sound and lay stranded on the mainland shore below the steep slopes of the Cunninghame hills (hence the name 'Largs', meaning 'slopes'). So ferocious was the storm that many were convinced it had been conjured up by sorcery.

## *The 'Battle' of Largs (2 October 1263)*

Visitors to Largs arriving from the south are greeted by the sight of a tall cylindrical tower standing, like an unlit lighthouse, on a low outcrop of rocks on the foreshore at Bowen Craig, overlooking the modern marina

there; constructed of rough whinstone with a sharply conical cap of red sandstone, it rears eighteen metres from the ground and is known, familiarly, as the Pencil. This prominent landmark was built by public subscription in 1912 on the traditional site of the so-called battle, and formally unveiled in appropriately foul weather on 12 July of that year.

The memorial, which cost £290 to build (plus £8 for the ornamental stonework of the doorway), was modelled on the eleventh-century 'Round Towers' of Brechin and Abernethy on the popular misconception that these had been erected for protection against viking raids. The only access is through a padlocked oaken door, two and a half metres off the ground. Inside, there is absolutely nothing, apart from a generous legacy of guano bequeathed by the local pigeons who use the memorial as a convenient dovecote. There were originally four wooden floors which allowed access by ladder to the 'look-out' floor at the level of the small window at the top, but the flooring has long since been removed for safety reasons. Soon after the tower was built, it was locally believed that the vikings themselves had stored their swords and shields in it! In our perceptions of Scotland's history, the sharpened Pencil has often proved mightier than the Sword.

The 'Battle' of Largs which it commemorates was not a proper battle; it was more of a series of skirmishes on the beach. Nonetheless it is celebrated annually at an autumn Viking Festival in Largs which culminates with fireworks at the Pencil and (of course) the burning of a viking boat. For the people of Ayrshire, Largs has much of the significance of Bannockburn itself – a battle by which Scotland was saved from the hordes who threatened the nation's freedom. It may have marked a significant turning-point in history, but it was never quite like that . . .

On the Monday morning after the great gale (1 October 1263) some of the local Scots militia came down to the shore and indulged in some long-range skirmishing with the Norsemen in the stranded longships, but pulled back out of range when Håkon sent some reinforcements ashore during a lull in the weather. Under cover of darkness that night the Scots managed to loot some of the cargo of the merchantman, but on the Tuesday morning Håkon himself landed with a task-force to rescue what was left of the cargo. The work was almost done when the Norwegians sighted Scottish troops approaching. It looked a very large force, and the Norsemen thought at first that it was commanded by Alexander in person. Håkon allowed himself to be rowed back to his fleet, albeit reluctantly; and now hostilities began.





According to *Håkonar Saga* there were an estimated eight or nine hundred Norwegians on land by then. The Scots had up to five hundred knights mounted on mail-clad horses, and a host of foot-soldiers armed with bows and axes. No estimate of their numbers is given. At one stage the saga says that the Norwegians were outnumbered by ten to one; but the context suggests that this refers only to a particular stand made by one group of Norsemen and should probably not be interpreted to mean that the Scottish army numbered eight or nine thousand men – which is hardly credible, particularly in the light of how things turned out.

The fighting was confused and inconclusive, and much of it consisted of desultory exchanges of arrows and stones. The wind now got up again, and Håkon had to sit helplessly on his ship and watch as his beleaguered men fought a grim rearguard action southward along the beach, withdrawing and counter-attacking in turn. As dusk fell the Norsemen mounted another fierce attack and drove the Scots from the beach; in the respite thus gained the Norsemen were able to embark and struggle back to the main fleet. A couple of days later Håkon sent another party ashore to burn the ships which lay wrecked there. There was no opposition: the Scottish army had obviously withdrawn inland and had no intention of engaging again. Nor had Håkon: on that same day his fleet upped anchor and sailed to Lamlash Bay on Arran. The 'Battle' of Largs was over.

It had been neither a famous victory nor a crushing defeat. The numbers given in the saga seem overblown, no doubt on the principle that if you cannot beat them you multiply them. Since the Norwegians had ultimately been left in possession of the beach at Largs, it cannot be said that they lost the day. George Buchanan's magisterial Latin *History of Scotland* (1582) claimed that Håkon had landed a force of twenty thousand men who were routed to the tune of sixteen thousand dead at a cost of five thousand Scottish lives; but that is now recognised by historians as nonsense. It is a nonsense, however, which has died hard.

Yet if the Norwegians did not lose that particular engagement, they certainly lost the campaign: Håkon had failed to secure the islands against future encroachments by Alexander, which had been his original objective.

Håkon now limped away with his battered and mutinous fleet. After a trying voyage, he reached haven in Orkney at the end of October. He took up residence in the Bishop's Palace, whose ruins are such a striking feature of Kirkwall, just across the road from the beautiful

rose-red Cathedral of St Magnus. No sooner was he installed in the palace, however, than he fell ill:

> *In his sickness, he had Latin books read to him at first; but he found it too much trouble to work out what the Latin meant. Then he had books read to him in Norse, first the sagas of the Saints, and then the sagas of the Kings of Norway all the way from Hálfdan the Black onwards, one after the other, until the saga of King Sverrir [his grandfather] was reached ... Near midnight the reading of* Sverrir's Saga *was concluded; and just as midnight passed, Almighty God called King Hákon from this earthly life.*

His death was big news in Norway. In Scotland, however, the *Melrose Chronicle* displayed a very different order of priorities:

> *In this year [1264] upon the Day of St Agnes [21 January], the queen of Scotland gave birth to a son, who, at his father's desire, was named Alexander ... And it happened that on the same day upon which the king of Scotland was informed that God had given him a son, intelligence also arrived that the king of Norway was dead. Rejoiced by these twofold tidings of joy, the king gave thanks to God, who exalts the humble and humbles the proud.*

The death of King Håkon was a real turning-point; but the entry in the *Melrose Chronicle* was of particular poignancy, not so much because of what had gone before, as of what was to come.

With Håkon's death the way was now open for Alexander's own territorial ambitions in the Hebrides. Alexander was a young and vigorous man, still only twenty-three years old; he had thwarted the naval might of Norway and seen off a major threat to his own kingdom, and now, with every reason to expect a long and successful reign ahead of him, the future of the realm seemed assured with the birth of an heir to the throne. And so, at first, it seemed.

As far as the Western Isles were concerned, Alexander was now in the driving seat. According to the *Saga of Magnús Hákonarson*, the Norsemen in the Orkneys sent an embassy to Scotland in the spring of 1264 to make overtures for peace, but were brusquely rebuffed. Alexander was not slow to press home his advantage; he was now in a position to pick off the Western Isles one by one, and was clearly determined to do so.





In Norway, Håkon's successor King Magnus (known as 'the Law-Reformer') was realistic enough to recognise that Norwegian suzerainty over the Western Isles dependencies was no longer tenable. In the autumn of 1264 he again sent messengers to Alexander; this time their reception was less chilly, and Magnus was told that treaty terms could be discussed in Scotland the following summer. Eventually, on 2 July 1266, peace was made and sealed through the Treaty of Perth. It was in all respects a sensible and welcome settlement, which King Magnus was able to announce in Bergen on 9 August without loss of face: in return for the cession of the Hebrides and the Isle of Man, the Scots were to pay a lump sum of four thousand *merks* of refined silver in four annual instalments, and an annual tribute of a hundred *merks* in perpetuity. According to the *Melrose Chronicle*, King Alexander paid out the whole sum of four thousand *merks* on the spot; but the annual tribute of a hundred *merks* seems soon to have petered out. From the Norwegian point of view, the most important provision of the Treaty of Perth was a firm guarantee that Scotland would respect Norway's sovereignty over the Orkneys and Shetland; indeed, the Northern Isles remained a Scandinavian preserve until the middle of the fifteenth century, when they were pawned by the impecunious King Kristian I of Norway and Denmark in lieu of a dowry for the marriage of his daughter Margrethe to the future James III of Scotland (see Chapter 16).

Hindsight suggests that it was the right and realistic outcome, and that Håkon the Old had been flying in the face of the inevitable. The Western Isles were too far from Norway to remain an outpost of Scandinavia, physically, socially or culturally; their only ties with Norway in the thirteenth century were those imposed by power-politics, and those bonds were being inexorably loosened.

With this deal, Alexander, at the age of twenty-five, had vastly enlarged the kingdom of Scotland. Only the Northern Isles now remained outside his royal control. Just as his father's Treaty of York had consolidated the southern frontier in 1237, the Treaty of Perth of 1266 extended and consolidated the western frontiers of the kingdom.

For the rest of his reign, Alexander III is said to have managed the government of his realm with justice and fairness, earning the respect and loyalty of his lieges. Through his consolidation and expansion of royal power and administration he welded the disparate regions of the realm into a cohesive nation with one Church, one law and a common language. The hitherto vague concept of 'Scottishness' was developing into a sense of national consciousness, an awareness of national identity

which would gain powerful expression in the Wars of Independence to come.

Meanwhile the relationship between Scotland and England remained very close, underpinned by intermarriage between the royal families and many of the leading nobles. Henry III had died in 1272, to be succeeded by his energetic and charismatic elder son, Edward I, whom Alexander found a congenial brother-in-law; they were on excellent terms, and Edward (as prince) and his wife Eleanor of Castile visited the Scottish court in 1268. To be sure, Edward (as king) tried to revive the homage issue: in 1278 he attempted to persuade Alexander to swear homage to him *for the kingdom of Scotland* at a ceremony at Westminster, but Alexander insisted that he would only swear fealty for the lands he held *in the kingdom of England.*

## *The Norway connection*

The death of Håkon IV in 1263, and the Treaty of Perth which ensued in 1266, cleared the political air between Norway and Scotland and helped to create a greatly improved relationship. This was cemented when Alexander's only daughter, Margaret, was betrothed to the grandson of Håkon the Old in the spring of 1281. The bride was nineteen years old, the bridegroom only fourteen; but he was the new king of Norway, Erik II, son of King Magnus the Law-Reformer. The marriage of these two royal youngsters symbolised the new amity across the North Sea and augured well for the future. In the event, however, it was all to end in tragedy, not only for Scotland and Norway but most especially for Alexander III himself; for 1281 also saw the first of a series of crushing family mishaps which were to darken the last years of his vigorous and successful reign.

His wife Margaret, sister of Edward I, had died in 1275, but Alexander saw no cause to marry again. However, in June 1281 his younger son, David, fell ill and died at Stirling Castle; he was eight years old. The mourning weeds had to be shrugged aside to celebrate his daughter Margaret's wedding and coronation in Bergen two months later. But on 9 April 1283, not two years after the marriage, Queen Margaret died at Tönsberg, apparently in childbirth. She was only twenty-two years old, and she left a sickly infant daughter, also christened Margaret, the 'Maid of Norway' who would be Queen of Scots for a brief time (see Chapter 9).

And then, less than a year later, came the third and cruellest blow so far: on 17 January 1284 Alexander's elder son, Alexander the Prince





of Scotland, who had been born on the very day twenty years earlier on which news of King Håkon's death had reached his father, died at Lindores Abbey in Fife after a long illness. Young Alexander had been married for just over a year, and died without issue.

The widower king had now lost all three of his children, and Scotland had lost all the immediate male heirs to the throne. But tragedy has to be overcome, and Alexander and his nation set about picking up the pieces. On 5 February 1284 the magnates of Scotland, meeting at Scone, acknowledged the infant Princess Margaret, the Maid of Norway, as heir presumptive to the Scottish throne, failing any further issue of her grandfather. Some of the nobility were unhappy about it, however: not only was she an infant, she was also a girl – and there was no precedent for a female ruler of Scotland. Besides, many of them felt that they themselves had a better claim to the Scottish throne. They comforted themselves with the thought that Alexander, who was still in his early forties, had plenty of time in which to produce another son.

Alexander recognised that he had to marry again. The bride he chose was Yolande, Comtesse de Montford, daughter of Robert IV, Comte de Dreux, a vassal of Edward I of England. They married in Jedburgh Abbey on 14 October 1285. But once again tragedy struck, the worst tragedy of all. Only five months after the wedding, Alexander III's thirty-six-year reign came to an abrupt end.

## *The death of Alexander III*

> *It is now no less than five hundred and forty-two years since Alexander's death, yet the people of the country still point out the very spot where it happened, and which is called the King's Crag.*
>
> TALES OF A GRANDFATHER, CHAPTER VI

On 19 March 1286 the king held a session of his council in Edinburgh. It became a convivial affair. The weather grew boisterous as the evening lengthened, but after supper Alexander insisted on setting out to spend the night with his young wife, who was staying in a royal castle at Kinghorn, on the east coast of Fife. It meant crossing the Firth of Forth in the teeth of a northerly gale heavy with snow, and a hazardous journey on horseback through the stormy dark. The boatman at South Queensferry at first refused to sail, but complied after being taunted with cowardice. When they landed at Inverkeithing on the north shore

the king was urged to stay there overnight, but he refused and took horse to ride to Kinghorn.

On the seaward side of the busy A921 coastal road between Burntisland and Kinghorn there stands a tall memorial, surmounted by a cross, dedicated to the memory of Alexander III. It was unveiled on 19 July 1886 'before a huge concourse of spectators – a red letter day in the history of Kinghorn', according to the *Fifeshire Advertiser* of that week. Today few motorists take advantage of the small lay-by next to it to stop to have a look at the memorial and read its inscription:

*To the Illustrious*
*ALEXANDER III,*
*The Last of Scotland's Celtic Kings,*
*Who was Accidentally Killed*
*Near this Spot*
*March XIX, MCCLXXXVI*

To one side of the road lie the broad sands of Pettycur Bay; on the other stand the shrub-shrouded cliffs along which the king was riding that night. No one knows what happened. The surmise has always been that he became separated from his guides in the darkness, his horse stumbled, and Alexander was thrown and fell to his death at the foot of 'King's Crag', as it was later named, where his body was found next morning. He was buried in the south aisle of Dunfermline Abbey, and all Scotland mourned its king. A scrap of verse, preserved in Andrew of Wyntoun's *Original Chronicle of Scotland* (c.1400), records the profound general sense of loss:

*Quhen [when] Alexander our kynge was dede,*
*That Scotlande led in lauche [law] and le [peace],*
*Away was sons [plenty] of alle [ale] and brede [bread],*
*Of wyne and wax, of gamyn [sport] and gle [glee],*
*Our gold was changit into lede [lead].*
*Crist, borne into virgynyte*
*Succoure Scotlande, and ramede [remedy],*
*That stade [placed] is in perplexite.*

Alexander's fatal night-ride is often portrayed as the result of romantic impulse: the ardour of an impetuous lover in the prime of life (he was only forty-four years old) eager to return to the arms of his bride in order to father a son. Be that as it may, his untimely death brought





an abrupt end to the mini Golden Age, and plunged Scotland into a fearful constitutional crisis which would lead inexorably to the Wars of Independence with England.